450 Cult Movies That You Should See
(or avoid)

Archived film reviews by Shane Burridge, Internet Movie Database1995-2008
Republished in Rotten Tomatoes Critics Section and other miscellaneous sites

1. REVIEWS

(Cult movies both popular and overlooked)

A.I.
Akira
Alice (1988)
All This and World War II
The Amazing Mr No Legs
Andy Warhol's Bad
The Anniversary
Antarctica
Aria
Audrey Rose

The Baby
Baby Cart at the River Styx
Bad Girls Go To Hell
Battle Royale
Beach Red
The Beguiled
The Belstone Fox
Beneath the Valley of the Ultra-Vixens
The Big Bus
Big Wednesday
The Black Cauldron
The Blue Lagoon (1949)
Body Snatchers
The Boy Friend
The Brain That Wouldn't Die
Brewster McCloud
The 'burbs
Butch and Sundance: The Early Days

Candy
Catch-22
Caveman
Chained for Life
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
The Chelsea Girls
Circle of Iron
City of Hope
The Clan of the Cave Bear
Cloverfield
Confessions of an Opium Eater
Cube

Damned River
Dark City
Darktown Strutters
Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid
Death Takes a Holiday
The Devil at Your Heels
D.O.A. (1988)
Don Quixote de Orson Welles
The Donner Party
Duel

Eight Men Out
Event Horizon
Evil Roy Slade
eXistenZ
The Eye Creatures
Eyes Wide Shut

F for Fake
The Falls
Fargo
Fast Company
Fast Times at Ridgemont High
Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!
Fear and Desire
Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas
The Fellowship of the Ring
Ferris Bueller's Day Off
ffolkes
Fiend Without a Face
The Fifth Element

Flash Gordon
The Flight of the Phoenix
The Flim Flam Man
The Fly (1958)
Forbidden Zone
Freaked
Freebie and the Bean
French Dressing
The Frighteners
Fun

Gawain and the Green Knight
The General (1998)
Georgy Girl
Ghidrah, the Three-Headed Monster
Godzilla (1998)
The Goonies
The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle
Grindhouse
Grizzly Man
The Gumball Rally

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire
Heat
Heathers
Hell's Angels
The Hellstrom Chronicle
The Hidden
A High Wind in Jamaica
The Hitcher
The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy
How Tasty was my Little Frenchman
Hugo the Hippo

I Spit on Your Grave
I Woke Up Early the Day I Died
The Incredibly Strange Creatures that Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies
Inserts
International Guerrillas
Isle of Fantasy
The Italian Job

J-Men Forever
Jabberwocky
Japan Sinks
The Jerk
Jonathan Livingston Seagull
Juggernaut

Kelly's Heroes
The Killer Shrews
King Kong (2005)
King Rat
The Kirlian Witness
Kitten With a Whip
Knightriders

The Last Man on Earth
The Last Supper
The Last Unicorn
The Last Voyage
Legend
Let it Be
Let it Ride
A Little Romance
Lolita (1997)
Lord Love a Duck
Lost Horizon
Lost in Space
The Lost World: Jurassic Park

Mad Dog Time
Mahler
Maidstone
The Man in the Moon
Maniac (1934)
Mars Attacks!
Matinee
Miami Blues
Miracle Mile
Mission to Mars
Mr Forbush and the Penguins
Mister Johnson
The Molly Maguires
The Monitors
Monkey Shines
The Monolith Monsters

Motoroma
Moulin Rouge
My Neighbor Totoro
My Neighbors the Yamadas
Mystery Men

The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey
Near Dark
Nice Girls Don't Explode
Night of the Lepus
1984 (1956)
The Ninth Configuration
North West Frontier

O.C. and Stiggs
The Ocean Waves
The Olympiad
The One that Got Away
Only Yesterday
Our Mother's House
Overnight

Paperhouse
The Party
The Passage
Pee-Wee's Big Adventure
The Phantom Tollbooth
Phase IV
The Phynx
Playtime
Pokemon the First Movie
The Pornographers
Pound
The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes
Punishment Park

The Railway Children
Raising Cain
The Red Tent
Return of the Living Dead
River's Edge
The Road to Welville
Robin and Marian
Robot Monster
Romeo and Juliet (1968)
Run Lola Run
Runaway Train

The Sadist
Salo, or 120 Days of Sodom
Sammy Going South
Sands of the Kalahari
The Savage Innocents
Second Sight
Shine
The Shining
Siddhartha
Simon
Sita Sings the Blues
Sleepy Hollow
Smile
Something Wicked This Way Comes
Somewhere in Time
South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut
Soylent Green
Speed Racer
Spice World
Spider
Stanley Kubrick: A Life in Pictures
Stereo
Stir of Echoes
The Stupids
Summer School
The Swimmer

Talk Radio
Tank Girl
Thalassa, Thalassa! Return to the Sea
Therese and Isabelle
They Live
Thoroughly Modern Millie
The Thrill Killers
Thunderbirds
Thundercrack!
Timecode
Tintin and Me
Titanic
Titicut Follies
Tomorrow I'll Wake Up and Scald Myself with Tea

Toys
The Trap (1966)
Tremors
The Trial of Billy Jack
Tucker: The Man and His Dream
The 27th Day
Twice Upon a Time
Twilight of the Cockroaches
Twins of Evil
The Twonky

U Turn
Ulzana's Raid
Undercover Blues
Until the End of the World

Valentino
Virus
Visions of Light

WADD: The Life and Times of John C. Holmes
War of the Worlds (2005)
What Dreams May Come
What's Up, Tiger Lily?
Whisper of the Heart
Whistle Down the Wind
White Dog
White Hunter, Black Heart
The Wilby Conspiracy
Wonderwall

Yellow Submarine

A Zed & Two Noughts

A.I. (2001) 145m. In much the same way that Spielberg included the adjunct '*Extra-Terrestrial*' to his film *E.T.*, the self-explanatory '*Artificial Intelligence*' was tagged on to what was previously known simply as *A.I.* One can't imagine the late Stanley Kubrick, who nursed the project for many years, making such concessions, suggestive as they are of a dumbing-down of the original concept, but for all intents Spielberg brought his version of it to the screen with integrity. While he and Kubrick are considered superb technicians and masters of film-making, their art is approached from viewpoints that couldn't seem more opposite. Spielberg is an emotive choreographer; Kubrick a philosophical visionary. Kubrick spent years developing his story for *A.I.* (so many that he died before getting a final script); Spielberg had finished principal photography barely a year after announcing his intentions to make the film. Whether or not *A.I.* is a success or failure is almost secondary to the fact that it creates an irresistible intersection point between these two major talents.

The 'Spielbrick' film, then, sees its genesis in a very short Brian Aldiss story, 'Super Toys Last All Summer Long'. In truth this story by itself makes more sense as a Spielberg project than it does a Kubrick one, a fact that Kubrick himself acknowledged when he handed the material over to Spielberg for completion. Significantly, it became the first feature screenplay written by Spielberg for nearly twenty years. *A.I.* concerns itself with cybernetic technology so advanced that it can formulate concepts about itself beyond the boundaries of its program. Hence David, the 'boy' who is the central character of the film, believes he is capable of love and seeks it in return. He simulates all emotional sensations to the extent that they resonate in his programming just the way they might influence themselves physically in a living human body. What's intriguing about *A.I.* is that the subject matter itself almost requires the collaboration of these two very different film-makers – one could not have made it without the other. David is both Spielberg and Kubrick, a work of technological craftsmanship searching for a soul, an answer, and a resolution.

And here's the catch: *A.I.* is multilayered, beautiful, unique and haunting, but early on it sets itself up for a resolution that it cannot possibly deliver. David, drawing inspiration from the story of Pinocchio, wants to be a real boy. This film may have fantastic elements, but it is not a fantasy, and no blue fairy is going to be waving a wand at its conclusion, which leaves only two outs: either David's mission will fail utterly or it will arrive at a compromise (which is another way of saying 'cop-out'). It appears that any likely ending is going to leave us wanting, but for a while, it looks like Spielberg has a chance of pulling it off. On my first viewing of *A.I.* I had no idea of the film's length and thought that the film had reached its conclusion around the two hour mark in a striking scene that found David confronting the object of his quest personified. It was a moment I found profoundly moving, and the fact that it had drawn such a powerful emotional response from me was enough to prove itself entirely satisfying as the film's ending. But as anyone who has seen the film knows, there is more to come beyond this scene, and *A.I.* still has a whole separate act to follow.

As it happens, I find the 'actual' finale less satisfying if only for the reason that I'm not sure how I am supposed to react to it emotionally. These narrative leaps of faith are more Kubrick's technique for storytelling than Spielberg's, and the film makes a habit of dramatically altering its tone and setting. The first act is mesmerizing and intimate, and holds us in thrall with its world of possibilities; the second becomes visceral and nightmarish; the third a voyage of isolation, despair and hope. It's an approach that will irritate many viewers, and is at odds with the mass audience that Spielberg is accustomed to catering for. If you're drawn into the story, then you won't care too much about its changing backgrounds. The point is that the foreground remains the same throughout. Haley Joel Osment is a wonder as David, pulling off the formidable task of making us believe he is an artificial life form, or 'mecha', from the moment he first appears. His companionship with a pleasure mecha called Gigolo Joe (Jude Law) and a 'supertoy' teddy bear provides cinema with a trio like

none other you have seen (some of these images seem destined as instant classics). The rest of *A.I.* follows suit – its distinctive art direction, continuously provocative questions (it doesn't try to presume answers), and John Williams score (which follows in the footsteps of Phillip Glass) combine to create a film like nothing that Spielberg, or anyone else for that matter, has done before.

But technical aspects aside, the major achievement of *A.I.* must be that it is able to funnel our emotional investment into a character that is a machine, and moreover, to do it without seeming manipulative. We are never allowed to forget that David is not a real boy, but this does not stop him from gaining our empathy. Even though we should know better, we don't discriminate between a human being with real feelings, or a simulacra that is programmed to believe it has real feelings (in much the same way that a crowd at a robotic demolition derby are instantly convinced that David is real when he shows fear). Why do we accept David so easily? Because years of going to the movies have taught us so; for what is any person we see on screen but a scripted character played by a hired actor? Arguably, the success of any film is not dependent on our abilities to separate ourselves from its actors or acting, but our connection with the emotional content they are working in. Kubrick had already proved this with non-human characters in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, during the justifiably famous scene in which the computer HAL is dismantled and 'dies' before our eyes. *A.I.* relies on that part of us, as human beings, which projects itself on to inanimate objects, and in turn is projected back to us via the cinema screen. Is it possible to identify the moment where our animatism turns to animism? It's one of many conundrums offered in the story, and even David himself is unable to tell, as is heartbreakingly proved by his belief that a simple statue has the power to grant him a wish. He may be the most sophisticated creation of his time, yet he is still programmed with the reasoning of a child.

In the end, *A.I.* is the kind of project that the term 'flawed masterpiece' is reserved for. It reminds me of 'Tintin and Alph-Art', the final book of Hergé's Tintin series that was unofficially completed in different capacities by other artists working from his notes and sketches. It's there, and it's not there. It almost feels like something that was never meant to be there, or something that you'd dreamed about but never expected to see in the waking world. Even though Spielberg's heart is beating throughout *A.I.* you still feel the ghost of Kubrick watching from hidden vantage points. It may be disappointing, or it may be the stuff of genius, but the reasons I'd give for anyone interested in watching *A.I.* are the same I'd give for reading 'Alph-Art'. The fact is, it was made, and we have the opportunity to see it at last, for better or worse: whether you think you're going to enjoy it or not, how could you bear never to know?

AKIRA (1988) 124m. This must surely be the mother of all manga films, a type of Japanese *anime* based on comics and graphic novels. If you don't like this sampling of the genre, then quit now – there aren't many that come better, or at least bigger, than this. *Akira* is the hit that all others, for better or worse, are measured by (its popularity in the West has helped this enormously). As with others of its type, the plot of *Akira* – which I won't even try to capsulize here – is secondary to the visual action. The story is set 30 years after World War III, which nominally makes it science fiction, and its convincing portrayal of a high-gloss dystopia (a mix of *Blade Runner* and *Clockwork Orange*) does stamp a strong SF feel onto the first half hour. Eventually this gives way to the personal torment and wholesale destruction conventional of manga, and the SF element is consumed by the quasi-religious ascension that appears to be the only logical 'out' that films of this type can conclude with.

At the time of production *Akira* was the most expensive animated film produced in Japan, and it may well still hold that record. It was obviously a labor of love for writer/co-director Katsuhiro Otomo, who also wrote the graphic novels on which it was based. His meticulous attention to detail (especially noteworthy are the backgrounds and enormous palette of colors) shows that he approached the task of animating his book as if he were making it as a live-action film – the drawings were so finely rendered that frames were drawn for 70mm film. He also departed from the conventional techniques of other Japanese studios by pre-recording his dialogue

before animating the characters. Otomo and animation director Takashi Nakamura use such 'live' camera techniques as slow motion, focus-pulling, dollying, and tracking; they infuse the soundtrack with a rich variety of background/foreground noise; and revel in simulating the effects of smoke, water, fire, wind, and speed. Most impressive is the way light sources (and their resulting shadows) are used, especially when they 'flare' into the lens. In fact, it's almost too much of a good thing. *Akira* is so consistently brilliant in its execution that it's hard to keep appreciating just how good it is. There are the inevitable dull spots – it's over two hours, after all – and some of the action sequences are never-ending, but it does manage to pull through at the end to deliver a huge-scale climax. If the finale doesn't seem as impressive as the opening ten minutes (which, like the rest of the film, deserves to be seen on the big screen for real impact) it's only because we've seen enough of it already.

I like *Akira* more than other films of its ilk (see ten minutes of *Legend of the Overfiend* and you've seen the whole movie) but it's distracting to see the characters speaking in American accents in the dubbed version, and it gets on my nerves hearing the characters screaming each other's names continuously. There are also too many lantern-jawed Pekingese-nosed he-men running around for my liking. Its scenes of mass destruction/carnage aren't as disturbing as the moments of more personal one-on-one violence (we've seen Tokyo trashed on film too many times to get upset about it now), which makes it distinctly unsuitable for children. Not that they'd be able to keep up with the plot anyway, but then again, who can? This also may be the only cartoon with product placement – unless a new trend now catches on.

ALICE (1988) 86m. This astonishing reworking of Alice in Wonderland was the first feature to be made by Czech surrealist animator Jan Svankmajer after two decades of producing short films. He served his apprenticeship well, employing all he had learned with his previous experiments to fully realize this combination of stop-motion animation, live action, and puppetry. Lewis Carroll's classic story has always been too erratically-paced and episodic to be successfully translated to film, but Svankmajer makes the text completely his own. It is his audacious, subversive interpretation of Carroll's Alice that makes this film so fascinating.

The Wonderland of Svankmajer's imagination is set entirely within the confines of a series of connecting rooms. We watch Alice journeying down shabby stairwells and riding an industrial elevator, and wonder if she is descending into Hell. At any rate, the characters inhabiting it do that concept justice. The denizens of Wonderland are outcasts – they are assembled of leftovers such as bones, sawdust and furs (the Caterpillar is merely a sock!) and do not inhabit Wonderland so much as squat there. They're the homeless and down-at-heel of Wonderland, who have found a deserted building to occupy. Their faces are immobile and emotionless – the White Rabbit (a scary character) has the same wild, fixed stare and clacking teeth whether he's handing Alice an envelope or throwing plates at her. Kristyna Kohoutova, who plays Alice, takes a neutral stance within everything she encounters. Svankmajer does not allow her much expression – he even has her cover her face the only time she laughs – and at several points in the story she actually becomes a puppet herself.

Svankmajer has gone on record as saying that all of his films are political, but surely this comment is more appropriate to his short subjects. If what he says is to be taken literally then it is possible to see a similarity between *Alice*'s Wonderland and the entropy of postwar Eastern Europe. There are cockroaches and nails in food, there are re-animated animal corpses everywhere, rooms are littered with debris, every door is locked and requires a key – it is certainly barren and oppressive. Is Svankmajer making a comment on his own childhood? Cultists of the book will find many of its familiar icons dramatically reworked in the film (the Cheshire Cat is truly invisible – he's not even in it!) but should bear in mind that as an animator, Svankmajer has adapted the story primarily as a visual experience. Hence the wordplay and verbal conundrums of the book are gone, although there is the occasional visual pun (e.g. socks in holes instead of holes in socks). His unique vision may be the most accurate representation of the mood of the books since

Tenniel established his original illustrations over a hundred years ago. A must-see – but not for all tastes.

ALL THIS AND WORLD WAR II (1976) 88m. It's the kind of film idea that you'd think would get talked about but never actually made: a précis of World War II edited from archival footage to the tune of Beatles songs. And not even the Beatles' own versions. *All This and World War II* was out of theatres so fast it was barely in them, perhaps indicating that studio execs realize exactly what it is they have on their hands only when they see it plastered in front of them on a big screen. This film was seen by very few when it was released (amazingly, it appeared out of competition at Cannes in 1977) and never even made it to VHS, let alone laserdisc or DVD. You may have memories of television showings (as I first saw it) or be lucky enough to catch a 16mm print (as I saw it a second time). It's certainly a candidate for the 'what-were-they-thinking' award of 1976, but not deserving of its disappearance into obscurity.

All This and World War II was destined to bomb (no pun intended) upon its release. Two words: too soon. By making it only six years after the Beatles had split up, the music-goers (as opposed to movie-goers) that made up its potential audience were either Beatles fans vehemently opposed to contemporary artists daring to 'improve' the original material, or non-Beatle fans less interested in the past than the new rock and pop of the 70s. Only now, decades later, does *All This and World War II* fare better. Its nostalgia level is twofold, working both with images of the War (the 40s) and the music of the Beatles (the 60s). The twenty-year gap separating these two periods of history has shrunk now that it is viewed from the distance of the 21st century, diluting the old/new anachronism that probably caused derision from audiences of the time. But that's not to say that the same concept would work if attempted now because the 1976 film itself is nostalgia, a footnote among other cinematic cacophony of the period. In other words, *World War II* had to be made in the 70s, fail utterly, and be revived again 30 years later before it could be enjoyed.

As the film itself is made up of archival footage, it's only the music that bears the brunt of the criticism. The selection of artists is interesting to say the least, and obviously designed to cash in on who was hot at the time (The Brothers Johnson doing 'Help'? Is that what we won the war for?), the real rock heavyweights making way for the likes of Helen Reddy and Leo Sayer. The orchestrations by both the London Symphony and London Philharmonic are florid and energetic, and the selection of songs bizarre but sometimes quirkily metaphoric (the outbreak of war is the 'Magical Mystery Tour'; militaristic Japan becomes the 'Sun King'). It's also the more PG-rated side of the war, so while we gets lots of explosions, tanks, and planes, we're spared the body count on the front lines and the horror of the concentration camps. Does it trivialise the war by approaching it in such a colourful manner? It hardly seems the case nowadays, when WWII images have become a staple of pop culture collage (Hitler becomes 'The Fool on the Hill' and Mussolini is 'Nowhere Man', but at least there's no footage of U-boats to the strains of 'Yellow Submarine'). Some of the found footage effect is reminiscent of the synchronicity experiments film fans have liked to try at home (Pink Floyd and *The Wizard of Oz* being the most well-known) and moments in the film seem to creepily synch up almost incidentally, even though we know they have been purposely edited in. My only objection would be seeing uncredited scenes from films like *Tora! Tora! Tora!* and *The Longest Day* mixed in with the historical footage. Still, the overall effect, at least on the big screen, is like seeing the world's biggest school project unfolding before your eyes. If you've ever had to cut and paste film yourself, you may feel like applauding – as indeed was the reaction of the audience I saw it with.

THE AMAZING MR NO LEGS (1981) 90m. Bad Movie fans couldn't ask for much more than this offering, which plays as a really bad *Starsky and Hutch* episode starring a double amputee and directed by none other than the Creature from the Black Lagoon. Chuck (Richard Jaeckel) and Andy (stunt driver Joie Chitwood) are cops who want to take down the drug dealers responsible for the death of Andy's sister. They follow leads, get into

shootouts, chase the bad guys, and do all the usual things that would make this an unremarkable and instantly forgettable action flick if it were not for one major quirk: the organization's hired muscle is a legless killer in a wheelchair.

There's no reason for 'No Legs' (as he is elegantly designated) to be an amputee in this movie other than its sheer gimmick value. Why, after all, would any crime boss employ such a potential liability to take care of his dirty work? But then, having set up this selling point, the story skirts around it. No Legs, as played by Ted Vollrath, doesn't have as much screen time as you would expect. His disability is barely acknowledged or mentioned by the other characters, and when he finally has a showdown with Chuck and Andy, it's over in moments. Those expecting laughs from the novelty of the movie's premise might be disappointed but they can take some satisfaction from Vollrath's one big scene where he takes out four hired goons at a swimming pool ("Be careful of that wheelchair!" they're warned). Surprisingly, this fight is not as far-fetched as it sounds – Vollrath did earn a black belt in karate regardless of his disability and was given the title of Grand Master. Vollrath, an ex-Marine who lost his legs in combat, doesn't make his participation in the film seem exploitative – he snarls and snaps practically every line and doesn't give his character any sympathetic features. But even without him, the rest of the film has no legs anyway – it's terribly acted and awkwardly directed. The scene transitions and character reactions are bad simply for the reason that they're noticeable when they shouldn't be. The dialogue, in better hands, might have been excusable for the genre, but here it's just laughable ("Back to thee old clock and dagger routine," sighs Andy's new girlfriend in her indistinct accent; "Come on, scum," says an arresting officer with an indifference that's almost civil). Even without dialogue the film manages to be hilariously awful – the funniest scene has Andy despondently listening to the strains of a pop duo appropriately named 'Mercy' while sitting in a bar that looks like it was decorated by a prom committee.

How Ricou Browning, better known as the guy in the Gill Man suit in the *Creature* movies, ended up helming such an odd project is baffling. Having been directed by a stunt man, it would be expected that *Mr No Legs* would at least deliver on the action sequences, but even here the movie is lacking – the fight sequences look too obviously choreographed. After more than an hour of plot, the movie shifts into what Ricou apparently believes is the highlight – a thirteen-minute car chase scene, justified by a ten-second conversation that takes place earlier in the film to establish one of the characters as a race driver. The chase, which is realistic enough with the exception of conveniently-placed obstacles such as piles of cardboard boxes, a house, and a wall of ice, is interrupted constantly by radio dispatches which might add to its authenticity but distract from the momentum, and urge our sentiments of "Come on, crash, already!" *Mr No Legs* ends as conventionally as it begins, leaving us with nothing special other than a token title character, and even he wouldn't seem too out of place if the film was accepted as a mix of genres, that of the Cop Film and Disabled Martial Arts. What's probably more unusual than this whole undertaking is that there is such a sub-genre as Disabled Martial Arts movies in the first place.

ANDY WARHOL'S BAD (1977) 105m.

Whenever I hear people say that they'd just watched a film that was the most way-out or quirky thing they'd ever seen, I usually figure that it must have been the first way-out or quirky thing they'd ever seen. Once upon a time such films were the domain of alternative film-makers but particularly since the turn of the millennium more and more film properties came to tackle controversial themes, make unconventional plot turns, and populate their stories with offbeat characters. That's why *Bad* won't be quite the same experience now as it was to audiences in the 70s – unless you're lucky enough for this to be the first quirky thing you ever see.

This is an 'Andy Warhol' film as much as *The Lawnmower Man* was a Stephen King movie (the difference being that King sued to have his name removed). Director Jed Johnson and writers Pat Hackett and George Abagnalo had dabbled in two or three of Paul Morrissey's films for Warhol, but the cast and crew are drawn largely from a resume of standard film productions. The only name actor among them (apart from Lawrence Teirney, who has a walk-on, or to be more precise, a walk-the-dog-on)

is Carroll Baker, brought back to the US after a decade of making obscurities in Europe, who stars as a laconic landlady with a sideline in home electrolysis. Baker carries out her dreary day-to-day chores alongside managing contracts for the female hired killers who board in her house. For all its characters, premise, and wicked humor, this could easily be a John Waters film (although lighter on camp). The remarkable thing about *Bad* is that it uses a mainstream production process to present something completely non-mainstream, going against the grain of underground, indie, or alternative film-makers who like to underline the non-studio, non-mainstream, unsophisticated aspects of their work.

In *Bad*'s opening scenes we might begin to feel sorry for the first character we see, a girl who enters a diner to pick up the leftovers of another customer's meal, only to have our expectations dispelled moments later as she goes out back to vandalize the place. From that point on we are introduced to a string of nihilistic, unlikeable characters. The only one with any sense of morality is a hopeless, housebound whiner, and the sole act of decency from another is when he changes his mind about killing a contract – big deal! As in many other Morrissey/Warhol films the characters of *Bad* exist in a vacuum, perhaps explaining why they feel the need to commit petty acts of cruelty or destruction. But I can't tell whether this behavior is the motivation of the characters or of the film-makers, who may have simply decided to make a list of what 'bad' people might do and then write a story around it.

In any case, there's plenty of bad behavior, some funny lines (my favorite comes from the owner of a cinema who concedes that a recent disaster could have been worse) and one sick joke that appears to be the keystone of the movie and will be remembered even if everything else in the movie has been forgotten – although there's a good chance that even if you have not seen the film, you already know the moment in question (if not, you would be wise not to read any further material about *Bad* until you've viewed it for yourself). A good deal of the performances are flat, with a restrained, sneering bitchiness, but Baker emerges as the mother hen to all others in her household, cooking, shopping, and incapable of having a conversation that doesn't involve money. After a while the subject of payment and reimbursement becomes noticeable as a consistent theme, indicating that perhaps Johnson and his cohorts had a point to make after all – amid all of the black humor and offensive antics, we can see that Money is the Root of all Badness.

THE ANNIVERSARY (1968) 91m. Even if you're not a Bette Davis fan you'll find her impossible to resist in this nasty, often hilarious comedy by director Roy Ward Baker. Davis is the matriarch of a family business who treats her three children more like board members than sons. The boys (two of them with female partners) gather at the family home for their mother's ruby wedding anniversary (their father has since passed on, and Davis wears a bright red dress for the occasion). They pledge that this year will be different. Fat chance.

This film version of Bill MacIlwraith's play looks pretty much how it would in a theater – there are only two outdoor scenes and neither of them are essential. Also, Baker elects not to use a background score. Quite rightly, the rhythm comes from the sharp, snappy dialogue, and Davis snaps with the best of them. She gives a delicious performance as 'Mum' (almost every line she delivers is a put-down) and succeeds in making us admire a character who by rights we should view as monstrous. What helps us from being put off the Davis character altogether is that we're not sure who to root for otherwise. We want her sons (and their partners) to break free of their mother's control, but none of them seem deserving of our support. They're either wishy-washy or petulant. It's noteworthy that the only one we come to admire (Sheila Hancock) is just as sharp-tongued and strong-willed as Davis – her worthy foil. As the film goes on, fiancee Elaine Taylor is ready to follow her example. You have to question Davis' real opinions of her children: does she even love them at all? I think it's more a case of maternal instinct in overdrive. Consider, for example, if Davis had three daughters instead of sons. I don't believe she'd be as possessive if she was in the position of welcoming another gender (sons-in-law) to the family home. As it is, the men in this film are tokens to be claimed and fought for – the only one exempt from this treatment

is the most soft-spoken of the trio, who has a fetish that is decidedly effeminate. In the end, it doesn't even concern us what real opinion Davis has of any of the others at her party – she so enjoys her Machiavellian power plays that it's easy enough for us to believe that she's simply acting that way for the sheer hell of it.

ANTARCTICA (1984) 142m. I've always been skeptical about the exploitation of animals in Japanese films since *The Adventures of Milo and Otis*, but this effort, at least, carries a disclaimer stating that none of the dogs used in the making of this film were mistreated. Which is a relief, considering what we see them go through. The story, which is largely speculative, recounts the survival of a dog team abandoned at a Japanese research base in Antarctica towards the end of 1957. At the start of the story an expedition loses its way while exploring the Pole and we see the scientists turn to two of their most reliable dogs to help save their lives. It's an opening which impresses upon us the hostility of the continent, so we are not surprised when the research team abandons the base before the onset of the savage polar winter. It is while two of the scientists (Ken Takakura and Tsunehiko Watase) are on board the icebreaker waiting for them outside the Antarctic shelf that they discover, to their horror, that it is impossible for them to retrieve the dog team from the base. Under protest, the two scientists are taken home, and most of the ensuing film juxtaposes their lives in Japan (they are disillusioned and feel shame) with the lives of the dogs as they struggle for survival.

Antarctica has many sad moments – we see the resourceful dogs die one by one – but these are undermined a little by its uneasy mix of fact and conjecture. There are other lapses in judgment (e.g. a contrived scene involving an attacking whale) but most intrusive in the shortened U.S. cut of the film is the use of a narrator who anthropomorphizes the dogs and gives their scenes the kind of stagey atmosphere reminiscent of early Disney animal stories (predictably, Disney was responsible for the idiotic 2006 remake which gave the film a happy ending and featured 'animal actors' instead of working dogs). I've travelled with a dog team along the sub-Arctic myself, and it is probably as symbiotic as an animal/human relationship may be, so it's annoying that most films featuring heroic canines can't distinguish between our own human concept of loyalty and what may be the pack equivalent peculiar to dogs. Having seen the English translation first and the original Japanese version afterwards, it's plain to me that the narrator is redundant anyway – as long as you know the basic story you don't need to know exactly what anyone is saying, leaving you free to listen to the simple but effective Vangelis score, and drink in the spectacular visuals (let's face it, Antarctica looks good in any film) of the dogs running wild in their frozen wonderland and pulling their sled across the ice. Seeing this on TV isn't the same as watching it on a big screen with an audience, which gives it an epic quality and makes it even more tearful. If you have a dog, you'll probably want to run outside and play ball with it afterwards.

ARIA (1987) 90m. This collection of operatic arias as interpreted by nine different directors (ten if you count Bill Bryden's linking story) was producer Don Boyd's personal project. He was understandably anxious about its reception but should have realized that only the idea behind his film can be deemed a success or a failure – as a work itself, it is so diverse in nature that it can only be evaluated piecemeal: it becomes just as interesting an exercise in criticism as it is in film-making.

To summarize: Nicolas Roeg's segment replays an obscure moment in European history and comes off as nothing much more than a curiosity; Charles Sturridge's images of children trapped in an adult world complement the numinous aria accompanying them; Godard is just as irritating as ever, though he at least should be commended for proving that a professional piece of film can be created with a minimal production crew; Bruce Beresford's contribution, in which virtually nothing happens, ends up as the most disposable entry; Julian Temple choreographs a bedroom farce to Verdi's 'Rigoletto'; Robert Altman, in a moment of pure perversity, shows us not the theatrical event but the audience watching that event (the joke wears thin pretty quickly); Franc Roddam expertly transplants the doomed lovers Tristan and Isolde into contemporary

Las Vegas; Ken Russell takes us into a mystical mindscape; and Derek Jarman's clip appears so generic that almost any piece of pop music could be dubbed onto it to much the same effect.

To view Boyd's project as a whole, we must really locate where its different directors agree about the essence of opera. In this instance, it's pretty straightforward – sex and death. It's also fun to see where they differ, in any number of binary choices: e.g., popular arias versus the esoteric; the adherence to or departure from the context of the original libretto; the refusal or indulgence of directorial trademarks (to this end, we can see evidence of Jarman's music videos and 8mm film paste-ups, Roeg's use of wife Theresa Russell, Godard's use of intertitles and soundtrack jumpcuts). Surprisingly, it is from the two least expected sources, Sturridge and Roddam, that the potential of Boyd's concept is best realized – their sequences are as evocative and emotive as we would hope for. But it is Ken Russell, who has always been adept at this sort of thing, where *Aria* really coalesces in terms of concept, visuals, and music. To say more would spoil it for you. *Aria* is unlikely to produce imitators, so it may well remain one of a kind. Its sumptuous photography and superb music make it ideal theatrical fare.

AUDREY ROSE (1977) 113m. Robert Wise has been responsible for a number of classic sci-fi/horror/fantasy films in his time. If any directorial trademark could link them together then it would have to be his restrained, intelligent approach to the material. *Audrey Rose* is among the least seen of his efforts but I find it resonates more effectively than his other classics – it conveys a sense of despair I haven't discovered in most other horror films. Actually, it's probably unfair to label this as a horror film, but the fact that it centers around a 'possessed' child pretty much seals its fate. John Beck and Marsha Mason are the parents of a girl (twelve-year old Susan Swift, in her debut) who attracts the interest of Anthony Hopkins. It turns out that Hopkins is convinced that the soul of his dead daughter has transmigrated into Swift's body, although it's not clear why the girl should relive panic attacks of her previous life at about the time that Hopkins shows up (her first moments of 'rebirth' take place in her bedroom, which is bathed in an embryonic pink light). The premise sounds simple, but it opens up a wealth of possibilities, touching on themes like identity, ownership, parenthood, and of course, life after death. Most strongly it addresses the issue of loss – in many ways this is a story about child custody. When Mason watches her daughter overtaken by hysteria, she is horrified, but the expression on her face doesn't change when Hopkins steps in and calms the girl down – she sees that her daughter is becoming his daughter. Her husband (Beck) is even more upset, coming to blows with Hopkins and warning him to stay away from his family. Swift (who gives a convincing performance throughout) is the helpless pawn in the middle of this mess, shuffled between hospitals, schools, and one 'parent' to another. To top it off, the whole thing ends in a courtroom.

Since this story is treated so rationally (Hopkins speaks softly and calmly throughout the entire film) its pseudo-supernatural elements come across as concessions to the film's inevitable 'horror' label (e.g. Swift's bewitched attraction to a ritual pyre built in her school playground). But where Wise and his young star really excel is in the final scene, which, unlike nearly all other horror films, requires no dramatic sets or special effects. Swift is mesmerising as she undergoes hypnosis and revisits past memories in her subconscious. Screenwriters Joe Wizan and Frank De Felitta (who adapted his novel) include many provocative moments. Single parents who have lost children in litigation will probably find this uncomfortable viewing. The film's ending, though viewed positively, is nonetheless depressing.

THE BABY (1973) 84m. What did audiences make of this when they saw it in cinemas in 1973? If you think Grant and Hepburn had problems bringing up Baby, then check this one out. Social worker Anjanette Comer drops in on Ruth Roman and her

grown-up daughters to assess their backward son, Baby. But no ordinary case, this: the son is just as grown up as the rest of the family. You may find yourself giggling with disbelief or maybe just embarrassment as full-grown adult David Manzy gurgles and coos in baby-talk and crawls on the floor in his diaper, while everybody standing around him acts as if everything is completely normal – which it would be after a while, I suppose. Nevertheless, watching Baby scrambling around at floor level while a room of men and women are going about their own business at a birthday party is still hard to swallow, and it's not as if we'd had plenty of opportunity to get adjusted to the film's screwy tone by that time. The sheer excess of its sensibilities – look out for that cattle prod, Baby! – pushes it aside from any measurable notions of success or failure. For a start, it's unclear exactly what genre *The Baby* aspires to be (although the last half, complete with a musical score of dragging cellos and tinkly piano, heads unsteadily into horror territory). Then there's the acting. And the screenplay. And the ending, which in any other film would be plain ludicrous, but at least here remains in keeping with the anti-logic of the rest of the story.

What makes *The Baby* a sort of schlocky-campy classic (and surely a billing of 'Strange Film Festivals' everywhere) is its admirable disregard for reason. You can't find holes in a story if there is no rational framework for them to exist in. Nothing makes sense: characters do terrible things and earn no repercussions; Baby is an adult but still hasn't figured out how to step over the two-foot wall of his play pen; similarly, unless Baby has been castrated there's no reason for him to speak in a baby's voice (this very grating effect is dubbed in); and I don't see how can it be possible for any person in Baby's situation, irrespective of mental ability, not to be capable of learning a few words of English – even kids raised by wolves learn to growl, for heaven's sake. You won't be able to avoid asking yourself questions while you're watching, either – for example, what kind of babysitter would want to change a grown man's diaper? (not one I would feel comfortable trusting, that's for sure). Manzy gets his expression of infant obliviousness down pat, but you have to wonder what was happening between takes – he was probably rightly figuring that his career was beginning and ending with this assignment. I don't even want to contemplate the attraction this film might have amongst fetishists. Everyone else should see it at least once.

BABY CART AT THE RIVER STYX (1972) 81m. This, the second episode in the *Sword of Vengeance* series (as it was titled for foreign distribution) was dubbed into English, re-edited with a preamble from the first and released in 1980 as *Shogun Assassin*, which is how I first saw it with a late night audience of likewise startled film fans. I'm glad that all six films have since been released for home viewing in their original Japanese versions, but there's no substitute for being part of the initial cinema experience. Based on the best-selling epic graphic novel 'Lone Wolf and Cub', the saga begins with samurai Ogami Itto (Tomisaburo Wakayama) taking to the road after being betrayed by a rival clan in his Shogunate. You don't have to see the first film to enjoy the second, and in fact may benefit from jumping in the deep end (which made it more memorable for me) and immersing yourself in the story's peculiar universe.

'Lone Wolf' wanders about Feudal Japan, trundling his infant son Diagoro in a large wooden cart and picking up sword-for-hire work as it suits him. In this episode, he's asked to save the business of dye manufacturers whose enemies have enlisted ninja assassins and a lethal trio of warriors. This is the most consistently exciting film of the six; the action is compelling not only because of the surreal progression of violent set-pieces (which look like they're straight out of the comic, and expertly directed by Kenji Misumi, who had been making samurai films for twenty years) but also because every action sequence reveals a little more about Ogami (but not enough to make him any less inscrutable). Without the enigmatic relationship he shares with his son, the *Baby Cart* films would be little more than flashy exercises in swordplay and bloodshed. Ogami and his son share a burden without overtly demonstrating their suffering or acceptance – he believes that they walk a path in a demon world, between life and death. Almost the only time they speak is when they say each other's names, yet they

clearly have a powerful bond and understand each other implicitly (in one scene a glance is enough for Diagoro to know he must slip off his sandal, allowing his father to count the seconds of its fall).

The Lone Wolf films make a perfect counterpoint to the classic 'Man with No Name' Westerns by Sergio Leone, which ended at the time that their oriental equivalent began. As in those films, *Styx* has many close-ups of faces and eyes; an eccentric musical score; the use of bells, chimes, wind and whistling to heighten anticipation and foreboding; rituals of death; dispassionate, expert killers; and a hero not unlike an earthbound avenging spirit. I wouldn't be surprised if this entry was the most popular of the series – I much prefer the purity of Ogami's sword-slashing melees to the pistols, machine guns, bombs, and Blaxploitation-style soundtracks that would creep into later episodes. As with the Leone Westerns, these films don't appear dated because they inhabit a world completely out of time. *Styx* was followed by *Baby Cart in Hades* (which moves at a slower pace but has a wild finale), *Baby Cart in Peril* (memorable for its tattooed swordswoman), *Baby Cart in the Land of Demons* (the most grim, with a little more attention on Diagoro), and *White Heaven in Hell* (which makes the mistake of adding magic to the storyline). The standard of the films is consistent even though they had to all be made within a couple of years, i.e. before the kid who played Diagoro grew up.

BAD GIRLS GO TO HELL (1965) 65m....or, if they can't get that far, New York. This example of shoestring-budget film making by NY auteur Doris Wishman, the only woman to really leave her mark in the exploitation industry, is recommended to those who are hell-bent on sampling everything from the sleaze/trash end of the cinema spectrum. Everyone else would be advised to spend time elsewhere. Its minimal plot concerns a good housewife (Gigi Darlene) who inadvertently kills her sex-crazed janitor by knocking a plate over his head (breaking the plate would have probably sent the film over budget) and then goes on the lam to New York where she encounters several locals interested only in abusing her. *Bad Girls* has several Wishman trademarks: a photo montage of opening titles, hand-held camerawork, bad dubbing (even the characters in *Speed Racer* emote more believably than this), women dressing/undressing with their backs to the camera, women dancing in their underwear, and, of course, several closeups of feet.

Bad Girls bears analysis only as part of a phenomenon and not as any intrinsic artwork. In the Wishman universe, women are helpless and men are bestial, but at least the consistency of her product develops its own reality. Watch three of her films in a row and you'll find that the snazzy music, absence of sets/props, and confined apartment interiors become almost normal. This works in favor of *Bad Girls*, because the mindlessness of the story, which episodically relates the protagonist's bad experiences one after another, is in keeping with the idea of a World of Punishment: the innocent accidentally transgresses and must suffer by being inexplicably mistreated by everyone she meets. It finally gets to the stage when the sight of her appearing with her suitcases in hand is laughable. There's more: you'll be bewildered when Detective 'Tom' enters a room via the wardrobe – did Wishman really expect us to believe it was a front door? And you won't forget Darlene's 'acrobatic dance'. At least these absurd touches prevent us from being offended by the film's sex and violence. None of it is believable: characters don't behave or react the way we would expect in real life, but they do behave exactly the way we would expect them to in an exploitation movie. *Everything* Wishman does is in service to the genre. Her dialogue (she uses pseudonyms on the credits) is not bad enough to be entertaining, but easy, predictable and banal. You'll have heard every line of dialogue in a hundred other movies. Still, while cheapies like this are easy to knock, they do occupy a valid place in cinema history. For example, this is one of the few films of the time where audiences could see a married couple showering together! And you have to give Wishman her due for entering a male-only genre and making a success of it. I don't know if that's any excuse for her making such brain-numbing efforts as *Nude on the Moon*, however.

BATTLE ROYALE (2000) 114m. Some films are censured as soon as they hit the cinemas, but just a synopsis of this one is enough for controversy: In

the near future, a class of 40 Japanese ninth-grade students are rounded up as part of a delinquency control act called 'Battle Royale' (wrestling terminology for a free-for-all fight), set loose on an island with an assortment of survival aids and instructed to kill each other within three days until only one remains or forfeit all their lives instead. Naturally, the resulting furore over the release of *Battle Royale* in its native Japan could do nothing but contribute to its publicity and high box office. Undoubtedly, its content will earn it a following from as many witless viewers as it will thoughtful ones, but that's no reason to condemn it. It's a familiar idea – we've seen it as early as *The Most Dangerous Game* in 1932 – which may remind you not only of other movies, but also 'reality television' gameshows which incite contestants to become the last man standing by progressively eliminating their competition. I'm not too surprised by the story, having already seen similar features (particularly *The Running Man* and Peter Watkins' *Gladiatorerna*) and other gimmicks like the 'exploding collar' in a number of futuristic prison flicks (at least in this film they're content to rupture the jugular instead of blowing up the whole head), but I will admit there is an edge and resonance to *Battle Royale* that sets it significantly apart from the rest of the pack.

To begin with, although the expendable cast is very large none of the characters appear one-dimensional or disposable. We don't have enough time to be presented with stock high school types (the nerd, the jock, the fat kid, the rebel, etc), and the students are put in the firing line before we can even decide whether they merit such outlandish punishment (the brief prelude shows a class taking the day off, and a teacher clipped by a knife during a mad dash down a corridor; hardly offenses deserving of a group massacre). Basically, they seem like a nice bunch of kids, but of course that is part of the film's strategy – that even nice kids are capable of killing to stay alive. However it is not the violence that is devastating so much as the tearing asunder of friendships and values, the things that matter most to these teenagers. There are exceptions of course, notably one student who approaches the ordeal with cold-blooded calculation ("Die, ugly," she sneers at a classmate she didn't particularly like), and a ringer who looks like he warped in from a live-action anime feature. The truth is that almost none of the class wants to participate, and it is their personal torment – not necessarily their deaths – that may resonate with you afterwards. In the film's most striking scene a group of girls suddenly turn upon each other as the fragile tension of trust finally shatters.

Battle Royale has enough clout to keep it from being dismissed as exploitative schlock: its source is a novel (which in itself was controversial); it was brought to the screen by a veteran, award-winning 70-year old director (Kinji Fukasaku); and has a key role by accomplished actor/director/screenwriter 'Beat' Takeshi. With this pedigree, many critics opted to brand the film as a satire (on the government, society, the generation gap, whatever), while Japanese politicians protested it as being irresponsible and damaging (there are practically no adults in the film, giving us the feeling that society has simply abandoned their kids in the wasteland) but I see it more as a cathartic – a literal bloodletting – that becomes every stupid high school scenario you've seen in teen movies given vent with axes, crossbows and assault rifles. It's a complete hormonal explosion in which most of the killings (and suicides) are done by students who are irrationally in love, rejected, besotted, jealous, bitchy, outcast, lustful, sexually frustrated, promiscuous or just plain emotionally confused. It's a sure thing that *Battle Royale* caused some outrage because of its primary visual motif of school uniforms spattered with blood (the characters responsible for most of the carnage choose not to wear uniforms anyway). Uniforms present order, purpose, and conformity, values held with some regard in Japan: no wonder the politicians there had a seizure. However this is the same culture that fetishizes such school attire in pornography and manga, or both simultaneously (let's not even start talking about the 'Rapeman' comic books) and Uzi-toting students probably don't look any more weird than half of the other stuff screening on Japanese TV.

Battle Royale could have been a reckless satire dehumanizing the characters for the sake of making it okay for us to laugh at the violence or it could have been a serious, visceral drama which would have had us feeling real anger toward the film and the people

who made it. As it turns out, Fukasaku and his son Kenta (who adapted the novel) get the right balance – some of the absurdity is intentionally funny, but not to the expense of the characters, and even though the entire scenario is too illogical and extreme to be taken seriously, the human element – i.e. the diverse reactions of the students to their dilemma – keeps us involved during every minute of the running time. This film throws us bodily into their hopeless situation and makes us think: What would we do? What could we do? Which choice would we make? Your mind may race with alternatives as you watch the body count inexorably rise. The possibilities are surprising, and in *Battle Royale*, they are all covered.

BEACH RED (1967) 105m. Actor, director, producer, and co-writer Cornel Wilde delivered a war film that pressed the right buttons with critics and audiences during the Vietnam protests of the late 60s. It's perhaps not as well known as other big-budgeted war pictures of the period, but well worth seeing. Wilde plays the Captain of a company of soldiers fighting in the Pacific in WWII, whose two objectives are to establish a beachhead on a Japanese-occupied island and scout inland for information. Wilde's directorial style catches us off guard – it's the kind of film where we expect random acts to occur to any character at any time, yet we are kept from feeling on edge by his use of pleasant, relaxing images and sounds. The jungle should be threatening and poisonous but instead is beautiful and natural; the soldiers aren't grimy and battle-worn but tanned and orderly.
Wilde isn't interested in shocking us (as *Saving Private Ryan* and its many immediate imitators would do many years later) or lecturing us. It would have been easy in one scene, when soldiers are staring at one of their fallen comrades, to have characters editorialize or comment broadly on the futility of fighting just to drum into us the waste of it all. Instead of eulogizing they stand silently, left to their own thoughts (which we overhear). This, and other forms of understatement (e.g. subliminal flashes of sights and sounds) are used throughout *Beach Red* effectively. Despite all the action and violence it's the peaceful moments that linger. The point the film appears to be making is that at its core war is an abominable and unnecessary interruption of every human being's right to lead a peaceful existence. Many of the characters have flashbacks of their domestic lives before the fighting, when things were normal and a lot happier. They're initially just as cliched as every other flashback we've seen in war movies, but Wilde chooses to show them from both points of view – the US troops and the Japanese – and presents them as still photographs and sound grabs, intercutting them at intervals to show that they are flashes of thoughts passing through the soldiers minds at all times, whether they are living or dying. The sheer mindless of the fighting is ably portrayed by the elemental drive of the story in which the soldiers are presented as insects, doing nothing but moving forward, deeper and deeper into conflict. They swarm *en masse* across sand and dirt and grass for the first part of the film, crawling and crouching (the camera is kept at ground level) until they are able to move upright, at which point a narrator tells us that all the hostile insects in the jungle ahead are Japanese. Dwarfed by the natural environment of the island, these soldiers may as well be rival ant colonies at war. *Beach Red* doesn't treat the enemy as monstrous or sympathetic – they are simply there. When there is any conflict both sides lose equal numbers, which seems the simplest way to show us that everybody loses. Wilde's project was well-received and still holds up decades later, which is more than can be said for actor-director John Wayne's embarrassing attempt to redress the balance with his pro-Vietnam film *The Green Berets* the following year. In Wayne's vision, *Green* meant Go! For Wilde, *Red* meant Stop!

THE BEGUILED (1971) 105m. A chamber piece of Southern Gothic by director Don Siegel. It marks an intersection point between his films with Clint Eastwood and his made-for-television horror movies. It's also interesting to note that even though Westerns dominated Eastwood's screen persona for many years, he and Siegel only ever made one such film together. That aside, some Western motif would usually work its way in to the Siegel-Eastwood productions: in *Coogan's Bluff* Eastwood wears a cowboy hat; in *Dirty Harry* he is the modern-day equivalent of a marshal determined to clean up his

town. *The Beguiled* also has the feel of a Western to it: there are armed horsemen, shootouts, a feeling of lawlessness, and an opening montage of sepia photographs titled in the lettering we associate with Wells Fargo, saloons, and wanted posters (in this film Eastwood is a 'wanted' man in more ways than one).

The Beguiled is set during the last days of the Civil War. Eastwood plays against type as a disheveled Union soldier hiding from rebel patrols. He makes his way to the remnants of a girls' school which harbors a few students, two teachers and a servant, all female. The severity of his wounds confine Eastwood to a bed and crutches for practically the entire film; despite this he tries to exercise some control over his environment. Eastwood is obliging, assured, and laconic, as we would expect him to be, but none of his screen adversaries to date could have prepared him for the trouble he has in store. The school is a powderkeg of repression: he attracts the interest of a woman with an incestuous past, a sexually active teen flirt, a 12-year old with an irrational crush, and an inexperienced young woman who yearns for true love. Crippled by his injuries and unable to leave the school, Eastwood begins playing one off against the other, delivering all sorts of false promises. We're used to Eastwood playing a hero, so we accept his casual words and silky delivery without really questioning it. He is, after all, a wounded enemy soldier doing what he can to stay alive. But soon it becomes apparent that we don't know if Eastwood is capable of ever speaking the truth, even with the most incidental of remarks.

Despite the obvious sexual politicking going on in the film I don't see Eastwood's character as being misogynistic so much as opportunistic. He turns brutish only after he gets drunk one time, and then becomes apologetic soon after. By this time, however, we've become so accustomed to his convincing 'sincerity' that it's too late for him to earn any further credibility with either us or the rest of the characters in the film. The story's ending isn't exactly problematic – it's almost a foregone conclusion – but while we don't feel sorry for what happens to Eastwood, we don't feel satisfied either. It's this ambivalence, and the fact that Eastwood doesn't play an action hero, that caused cinema audiences to pass this by upon first release. Siegel's direction and Bruce Surtees' lighting (diffused and pretty outside, unobtrusive and dim inside) make this look like a Hammer horror movie – that's probably to prepare you for one scene, late in the film, that will make your toes curl. I like to imagine the odd goings-on in this house taking place just down the road apiece from an oblivious Scarlett O'Hara who is meanwhile preoccupied with her own romantic problems. Maybe she should have dropped in on Eastwood, too.

THE BELSTONE FOX (1973) 103m. James Hill's film starts off as a children's story – Ashler, huntsman for the Belstone estate, adopts orphaned fox cub and names him Tag; fox forms bond with hound pup; huntsman returns grown fox back to woods – but ends up like a landlocked version of *Moby Dick*. Once released, the appropriately-named Tag leads the Belstone Hunt on a cut-and-run chase through the trees and fields with an intelligence beyond that of your average fox. He's certainly smarter than the humans chasing him, at any rate. When one hunt ends with fallen riders and dead hounds (in a stunt worthy of a Roadrunner cartoon) the chase gets personal. Ashler, who starts out as a sympathetic, fair character, becomes driven by a vendetta that consumes him to the end of the last hunt, in which one of the two antagonists must die.

This is the stuff of a fine character piece, but we never really get under the characters' skin. Even the fox could have done with a bit of development. Hill spins an engaging yarn, but keeps neutral, presenting neither Tag or Ashler as hero or villain (our tendency is to side with the fox). Nor does he make any negative comment about fox hunting. But then, he doesn't have to: the sight of grown men on horses stampeding about the countryside after a small animal is just plain risible. The Hunt, heavily ritualistic, is a fair representation of the human condition – civilized on the outside, barbaric underneath – and anyone who breaks from the pack is immediately an outcast, whether it is Ashler or his favorite hound Merlin. *The Belstone Fox* mixes individual-vs-conformity and man-vs-nature themes easily and without pretension. If it's a children's film then it has more intelligence than the usual cutesy-

animal flick of its type. Its only slow point is the unnecessarily long birthday sequence. Was this included just for the sake of contrasting another 'growth' ritual against that of the Hunt?

BENEATH THE VALLEY OF THE ULTRA VIXENS (1979) 93m. If this manic, lurid, plotless sex romp had been the only thing ever made by writer-director-producer-editor Russ Meyer, it would no doubt have become an instant classic. It still has, as far as its fans are concerned. It turned out to be my introduction to Meyer, double-billed with *Supervixens* (talk about being thrown off the deep end) so I was able to enjoy it more than Meyer devotees who had already seen better films like *Mudhoney* and *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* Here's the story: a narrator (Stuart Lancaster) introduces us to diverse characters populating Small Town, USA, who spend the next hour and a half jumping into bed (and rivers, and bathtubs, et al) with each other. Most of the 'action' revolves around sexually frustrated Ken Kerr and unsatisfied wife Kitten Natividad (Meyer's girlfriend at the time) getting it on with a variety of partners.

What makes Meyer's films unique among other skin flicks is his dexterity as a film-maker, most notably his energetic editing which inserts flash-forwards and cross-cutting to humorous effect. His characters are larger than life – oversexed, fervent, bitchy, and (if they're female) astonishingly proportioned. He fills his frame with hicks and white trash and then films them at tilted angles against bright cartoony colors. When Meyer first attracted a following, movie buffs figured that he was too smart a talent to be involved with grindhouse material. However when he strayed from the independent scene and worked on the studio projects *Fanny Hill*, *The Seven Minutes* and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, the results fell short of expectations. Meyer returned to indie adult fare, eventually calling it a day with *Beneath the Valley of the Ultra Vixens* (even though a further 'Vixens' episode was promised in the final credits). To compare *Ultra Vixens* with a much earlier Meyer film, *Wild Gals of the Naked West*, is to see a lack of stylistic development despite the gulf of years and experience. Both are a series of lewd, comic vignettes filmed in the trademark Meyer fashion – the main difference is that *Ultra Vixens* is a lot more graphic. Not only does Meyer up the ante on the sexual couplings but the breasts of the heroines are even bigger than in his previous films. In his early days, Meyer was spoofing the genre; in *Ultra Vixens* he is spoofing himself (he even dubs in his own flatulence for the sex scenes!). It's an amplification of everything that has gone before, but at least this time Meyer backs off from the rape and violence that was beginning to infuse his work (in *Blacksnake* it had become so over-the-top it was more ludicrous than offensive). In *Ultra Vixens* the hot-tempered characters still have fistfights, but instead of blood they spill brightly colored paint.

Is *Ultra Vixens* worth seeing? Yes: it is deliciously crude and well-made cinema. But it's probably a good thing that Meyer quit when he did. There's a telling moment when he appears at the film's end, toting his camera about and wondering where his crew has gotten to. Perhaps he knew he couldn't really top *Ultra Vixens* without descending straight into porn, which was fast becoming big business with the advent of home video technology. Or maybe there's an even more insidious reason – with the proliferation of breast implants, every actress was becoming a potential Meyer performer, and the 'King of the Nudies' no doubt had too much of an eye for natural beauty to accept substitutes (the talents on display in the opening scene are highly suspect!). In the meantime stacked women appeared in everything from teen comedies to music videos. It wasn't censorship or economics that killed Russ Meyer. It was silicone.

THE BIG BUS (1976) 88m. Larry Cohen took a break from his offbeat horror tales to co-write this James Frawley directed vehicle (pun intended), a parody of the disaster movies boom that surfaced in the mid-seventies. The big bus itself is the pride of the Coyote (not Greyhound) fleet, a nuclear-powered luxury transit vehicle that is about to make its inaugral run non-stop from New York to Denver. Add to this the following plot ingredients: a driver haunted by an incident from his past, a collection of eccentric passengers, a disaster which sends the vehicle out of control... it's easy to see the similarity between *The Big Bus* and the 1980 disaster spoof

Airplane! (there's only two minutes difference in their running times). While I find both films funny, the disconnected, rapid-fire gags of *Airplane!* have been recycled too often by the slew of similar 'zany' takeoffs that it spawned to make it any longer unique – which leaves *The Big Bus* the more distinctive of the two, by default.

Joseph Bologna, Stockard Channing, and John Beck, as the principal crew of the bus, have to play their roles fairly straight, leaving most of the laughs to their oddball passengers, ably represented by Richard Mulligan, Ruth Gordon, and Rene Auberjonois (he's a cynical priest who beats the elderly Gordon to a window seat and smirks 'Where is your God now, old woman?'). Nobody has a particularly big role – except for the bus, which really is big – but the 'star-studded' cast of familiar faces is one of the conventions of disaster movies that writers Cohen and Fred Freeman have stuck to. They have also incorporated into the plot elements of other notable disaster flicks – specifically *Airport*, *Airport '75*, *The Poseidon Adventure* (!), and even a touch of *Earthquake* – though what's more fun is their choice of subject. The film-makers obviously noticed the trend in these movies to place frightened-but-resourceful passengers together on any number of calamity-bound vehicles. Along with the planes and ships of the previously mentioned titles, these hapless casts have had their lives endangered by trains, airships, and even rollercoasters. A big bus was all that was left. This is, of course, absurd. The film's level of humor reminds me of a *Mad* magazine movie send-up (illustrator Jack Davis was even called in to design the movie poster) and from what I've seen, its amiable, silly approach will be enjoyed more by early teens than adults. At least the producers didn't feel they had to resort to cheap innuendo and 'comic' violence.

BIG WEDNESDAY (1978) 120m. John Milius' cult favorite is awash with his usual buddy-bonding and rites of manhood, but presents us with characters that are more engaging and sympathetic than those in several of his other works. *Big Wednesday* looks at four episodes in the lives of a trio of friends over a period of twelve years. Jan-Michael Vincent, William Katt, and Gary Busey are believable as a group of L.A. surfers who grow up through the sixties and witness the changes in each others lives. As you would expect from a Milius film, the men take center stage. Their lovers (Patti D'Arbanville and Lee Purcell) are merely bit players, relegated to responding to each of the surfers' successes, failures, and desires. But what are wives and girlfriends compared to your friends, who will stick with you – as surfboard craftsman Bear puts it – through hell (Vietnam) or high water (the seasonal swells)?

Milius plays off masculine iconography (beer, fistfights, cars, guns, surfing, war, stripshows) against Bruce Surtees' subdued photography and Basil Pouledouris' pensive musical score. For this reason I believe *Big Wednesday* imparts quintessential elements of the male psyche more persuasively than Milius' other gung-ho action pictures. Also, it's a pleasant surprise to see him siding with characters who are dedicated draft-dodgers. The film's final episode, which should be seen in a cinema for the best effect, has a big, mythic feel to it. Of course Milius, a former lifeguard and surfer himself, has been aiming for this all along: Jan-Michael Vincent's character is the archetypal Legend in His Own Time, a latter-day Beowulf contesting the fury of the deep; he and his friends enter their patch of the beach by a ruined stairway that looks like the remains of an ancient temple; Vincent's surfboard is passed on to him (in the manner of a sword or any other powerful token) by a master craftsman who has foretold the 'Big Day' when it must be used; the three friends paddle into the roaring ocean to brass fanfares, as if they were entering a joust. Was it any surprise that Milius would go on to direct *Conan the Barbarian* after this? This well-made film has the power to appeal to both surfers and film buffs.

THE BLACK CAULDRON (1985) 77m. I can't believe it took nine writers to script what turned out to be an essentially simple story for this $25 million animated Disney feature. *The Black Cauldron* tentatively tried some variation in approach for the studio, which hadn't produced any equal to its past classics for many years. A younger generation of animators worked on the film for five years, included

computer enhancement for the first time, and released it in 70mm. It attracted some interest but didn't appeal to the public as much as the studio's future hit *The Little Mermaid*, which resulted in Disney sticking to its tried-and-true musical adaptations of fairy tales and folk stories. It's annoying, because it would have been intriguing to see what new direction *The Black Cauldron* might have encouraged had it been successful.

The Black Cauldron is a combination of the first two books of Lloyd Alexander's Prydain series. The darker hues of these stories make them an unusual choice for Disney, but the film is effective entertainment for children and the animation is of the standard you'd expect so it seems churlish to grump about it as an adult. Still, the characters aren't that engaging and the story could have done with more action. The only sequence which really contains a sense of movement is the one in which a pig is chased by a pair of gwythaints (dragonlike creatures), but this appears early in the film and even then it's too short. It's also obvious that the writers couldn't really avoid including characters that, while central to the original stories, become superfluous in the film. In the end, only the hero Taran, his pig Hen Wen, and a creature known as Gurgi (who is included for comic relief and sounds like Donald Duck calling long distance) are essential for the quest to find and destroy the evil cauldron of the title.

Given the nature of the story (which features lots of skulls, skeletons and demonic imagery), the film-makers may have wanted to keep the film from appearing too scary for their younger viewers – in my mind it looks like an edited version of a putative longer film. *The Black Cauldron* hitches up its pants, says good-bye to Mom at the door, but then decides to go no further than the front yard. Like Taran, the pig-keeper who wants to become a warrior, *The Black Cauldron* is a film that wants to show us that it's growing up (it's one of the very rare Disney animations in which no animals talk and no characters sing) but it can't shake loose the Disney trappings it is garbed in. Even though it is one of the least remembered efforts of the studio (unless it made an impression upon you as a youngster), it's still worth noting as a possible turning point. Imagine, in a parallel universe, that this film was greeted with acclaim and success. Imagine what new, daring projects this may have encouraged the studio to develop. It didn't happen, but *The Black Cauldron* did help promote Alexander's well-crafted fantasy novels, so its investment wasn't altogether unprofitable.

THE BLUE LAGOON (1949) 101m. Most of those who watched Brooke Shields and Christopher Atkins getting the hots for each other in 1980's well-publicized *The Blue Lagoon* would not have been aware of this earlier version filmed 30 years beforehand. Based on the first of a trilogy of novels by Henry De Vere Stacpoole and filmed on location in Fiji (as was the remake), the story is too simple to generate much variation between either adaptation, but there's not a lot that can be done with castaway plotlines anyway: Defoe started by depositing one man on a deserted island in 'Robinson Crusoe', Wyss followed it by marooning an entire Robinson family, and Stacpoole's spin on it is to strand two children.

With no other people on a remote tropical island after the death of the only adult in their company, it befalls two youngsters to colonize it simply by presence alone. The most fascinating aspect of the premise – namely, how exactly do a 9 and 10 year old survive on an uninhabited island? – is completely ignored when the story jumps ahead in time ten years to show them as adults. The boy develops into an athletic hunter-gatherer and dives off waterfalls; the girl grows up to be Jean Simmons and puts on a shirt. The lush natural setting and the isolation of the two protagonists sets up an obvious Eden parallel, and the snake on this occasion is a passing trader who brings greed, envy and deceit to their paradise. His departure appears to leave no trace of these particular corruptions, but it's probably no coincidence that Simmons and her fellow castaway Donald Houston become sexually interested in each other immediately afterwards. The absence of sexuality up until this point is the most difficult aspect of the story to accept – I doubt that audiences in the late 40s would have been convinced that two 20-year olds were still virgins after a decade marooned with each other, let alone audiences in the 1980s (which is why the Brooke Shields version plays more like a horny teen's fantasy). As would be expected for the time,

the act itself is represented so discreetly on screen that it's almost invisible (there are some scenic views while Houston narrates John Donne's "The Good-Morrow") and accomplished only after the couple have become 'married' to each other using instructions from the only book in their possession, an etiquette manual which has in effect become their bible – as with Tarzan and Jane before them, these co-habitants had to make a concession of propriety for the Censor's Office.

The innocent approach to 1949's *Lagoon* works better when viewed as an alternative or balance to the less restricted remake (which at least follows the source material more closely), making it easier to play along with the naïveté and enjoy watching Simmons (oh yeah, and her co-star) wandering about against the beautiful backdrop of the South Seas. But is it paradise? A few unexpectedly creepy moments in the film give an indication that not all may not turn out well in the final reel, and the outcome remains touch and go until moments before the credits roll. Think how differently the movie would have turned out with as little as the final ten seconds cropped off – because chances are you may care more about Simmons and Houston than you would about Shields and Atkins.

BODY SNATCHERS (1993) 87m. I don't know why anyone felt the need to produce another remake of 1956's classic sci-fi/horror film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, yet here it is, and the lineup of creative talent behind it is promising. Check out this intriguing combination: writer-director Larry Cohen (screenplay credit), writer-director Stuart Gordon (story credit), and writer-director Abel Ferrara (who gets the directing chore despite being the only one of the three to show no previous interest in the genre). It sounds as if the resulting film might be a body snatcher designed by committee, but the end result is a fairly tight product.

Prior knowledge makes this difficult viewing – there's little suspense or surprise because by now we have come to know the story too well: a few townspeople discover that their family, friends, and neighbors are gradually being 'replaced' by emotionally void duplicates and soon find themselves running for their lives. The story is faithful to the original (and the Jack Finney novel) in concept only. Its two major changes are firstly that the central protagonist is a 17-year old girl (Gabrielle Anwar), and secondly that the small-town setting (changed to a big city in Philip Kaufman's 1978 version) has been overshadowed by a military base. It would seem that what we have here is some ready-to-bake commentary on army personnel sacrificing their individuality to become a gestalt of emotionless drones, bla-bla-bla, but fortunately the story avoids this route and takes the more personal touch of paralleling the invasion of the alien 'body snatchers' with the 'invasion' of a new stepmother into Anwar's home (a creepy performance by Meg Tilly). As far as Anwar is concerned, her mother has already been replaced; the alien-invader scenario that follows is the realization/externalization of her fears now brought forth for everyone else to see. Ferrara keeps the human element at the forefront of the story by shooting much of *Body Snatchers* in closeup and midshot, letting faces and bodies fill the frame. This keeps the film real and down-to-earth until the first FX sequence, which may or may not be an improvement on previous versions depending on your point of view. One of the more frustrating elements of the 1956 film for me as a young, first-time viewer, was the total lack of explanation concerning the body-transfer from seed pod to human copy. Ferrara/Cohen/Gordon present a simple, workable explanation – although it may be argued that it is scarier *not* to know anything of the process, and it was this lack of information that contributed to the nightmarish quality of the original.

I don't think the FX are as big a problem as the decision to have Anwar narrating the story in flashback from frame one, however. Automatically we are assured that her character will be still be around by the end of the story, which robs *Body Snatchers* of a pivotal element of suspense. I can't believe a writer as seasoned as Cohen would have let so obvious a slipup get by him. But then again, I find it surprising to see Abel Ferrara slickly packaging a film so uncharacteristic of his usual down-in-the-dirt urban dramas. Hmm. Has anyone checked their backyards for seed pods lately?

THE BOY FRIEND (1971) 145m. Ken Russell's delirious, hilarious, visually dazzling version of Sandy Wilson's stage play is his one film that most critics agree to approve of. It's at once a homage to and send up of old Hollywood musicals (especially those by Busby Berkeley): an ingenue is thrown into the spotlight when the star performer calls in sick; a romance blossoms between the two leading players; a movie mogul happens to be talent-spotting during that very performance (this idea was based on Russell's own experience of viewing the stage production). It also has the backstage intrigues of all other 30s-40s musicals, only the major difference is that Russell allows them to spill onstage as well. He piles levels upon levels – it is as a backstage plot within the play within the film that we, the movie audience (and not the audience in the movie) are supposed to view Russell's film. In Russell's version, the plot of the play serves no other purpose than to parallel his own storyline unwinding behind the scenes – he is not interested in a straightforward film adaptation of the play (it would be impossibly vapid) but a specifically cinematic reworking of the show's many musical numbers.

The amount of musical set-pieces in this film (especially if you've seen the full-length version) totals more than any other I can think of in a film of this type. Russell, who has always liked choreographing his imagination to music, at last has the chance to indulge himself for all he's worth (not that anything's really stopped him before). Scene by scene, we are treated to one flamboyant setup after another – they are obviously well beyond the capabilities of the run-down theater staging the play, but fit in seamlessly with the film's several fantasy sequences, which is the main point of this, and indeed all of the musicals it acknowledges, i.e. to provide escape into a colorful world of happy endings.

The Boy Friend is probably best known as the debut for 60s model Twiggy, who had never acted or sung before but was assured by Russell that she would be perfect for the role. She pulls off her part effortlessly and is ably supported by an excellent, high-spirited cast (who were obviously tuned in to Russell's wavelength). Having seen both versions of this film (one cut is 25 minutes shorter) I would question the inclusion of the Bacchanalia fantasy and a couple of the less stagy songs. Wilson's stage follow-up was the relatively unknown *Divorce Me, Darling*. Watch out for cinema screenings in revival houses – this one really has to be seen in widescreen Panavision. Its cast includes Russell regulars Christopher Gable and Max Adrian.

THE BRAIN THAT WOULDN'T DIE (1962) 92m. For bad-movie lovers only. This hopeless horror pic, also known as *The Head That Wouldn't Die* truly comes a cropper, aided in no small part by The Brain That Couldn't Direct and The Cast That Couldn't Act. After an offscreen car crash, neurosurgeon-cum-mad scientist Dr Cortner (Jason Evers) somewhat casually relieves his girlfriend of her head and keeps it alive in his basement laboratory (the kind of setup that you already know is going to go up in flames during the picture's climax). Arguing with her that "I want you as a complete woman, not part of one" – did I mention that the head always has to have the last word? – he roams the town in search of the "right" body for his love (played by Virginia Leith, a discovery of Stanley Kubrick's). As his search concentrates primarily on seedy nightclubs, beauty contests, and sleazy photography classes, it's not hard to gauge just what "right" means in this particular doctor's book.

Writer-Director Joseph Green's static direction (he has no idea how to stage extras or action), the boring, empty sets, and the amateur cast (as Cortner's girlfriend, Leith is required to act only from the neck up, an instruction Green appears to have inadvertently given the rest of the cast as well) make most of *Brain* very dull. The outright stupidity of the production is entertaining at first, but becomes tiresome until the closing sequences – it picks up during Cortner's lab assistant's ridiculously protracted death scene (although this is shortened in some versions). Because the narrative is so nonsensical it's easy to miss how tacky the film's agenda really is. Women are objects – all that matters is how they look, whether they are burlesque dancers, models, or beauty contestants. When two women get involved in a brawl Green has their room decorated with pictures of cats, and adds a meow at the end of the fight just in case we didn't pick up the joke. Leith

stands out as the only character that is totally independent – even while a disembodied head, she is in service to no-one. Without a body, she isn't beauty, but 'brains' – it is only in this state that she stops being the doctor's obliging girlfriend and becomes his critic instead (he even has to gag her at one point). To Green (and the doctor) body = object = control, which explains the change in the characters' relationship. In other hands, these ideas might have been teased out to create a much more coherent and interesting film, but Green's cardboard characters and lazy, juvenile script pretty much put paid to that idea. Instead, it's just lousy.

The Brain That Wouldn't Die is one of Mystery Science Theater 3000's targets for spoofing. As is usually the case, their own absurd dialogue doesn't get much worse than the original's (for example, the moment when Dr Cortner takes over another surgeon's patient, peels back his scalp, cuts open his skull, and plugs wires into his brain, assuaging any worries the surgical team might have by telling them "I've been working on something like this for weeks"!). If MST3K want a real challenge, they should take on *Gone With the Wind.*

BREWSTER MCCLOUD (1970) 105m. Even those who aren't taken with Robert Altman's style of film-making have to admire him for maintaining an affection for off-Hollywood (as in the manner of off-Broadway) projects throughout his long career. Audiences who had enjoyed Altman's breakthrough anti-war comedy *M*A*S*H** in 1970 were interested to see what he would come up with for an encore. The result, a mere 11 months later, was his laconic fable *Brewster McCloud*.

Bud Cort plays the title character, a loner who lives beneath the Houston Astrodome working on a pair of man-powered wings that will enable him to fly. While he is busy collecting the materials he needs, mysterious deaths by strangulation occur throughout the city. What's the link? Birds. Altman's running joke through this movie is that it is a birdwatching film, with avian references appearing everywhere, from the meals the characters eat to the license plates on their cars. Over the course of the film a narrator (Rene Auberjonois) compares the appearance and behavior of people in the story with that of birds while increasingly becoming more birdlike himself. These constant bird motifs would appear to reflect the flight-obsessed thoughts circulating through the characters' minds. It seems to me that Brewster's desire to fly is not because he has some kind of Icarus complex or any affinity with birds in general (although he is rather owl-like) but that he is acting upon a type of race memory buried deep within him. It's as if he knows that we were all once born to fly, but have forsaken and forgotten it.

Brewster is aided in his quest by Louise (Sally Kellerman), an elusive mixture of mother and mentor, but more pertinently a guardian angel, who has scars down her back that suggests she once had wings herself. Even though all Brewster wants to do is take flight (the only time we see him happy in the film is when he finds himself airborne) it is never made clear why, or even where to. Could it be that he is trying to reach a subconscious memory of heaven? The redemption angle is reinforced further when Louise is dismayed to find that he has slept with a girl he has barely known (Shelley Duvall, who had never acted until her debut in this film). These sins of the flesh equal a loss of purity that will 'ground' him, i.e. seal his mortality and prevent his entry into the angel-world. The only would-be girlfriend of Brewster's to get approval from Louise is Hope (Jennifer Salt), who is able to get sexual satisfaction from their relationship while still keeping it entirely platonic (and, as Emily Dickinson said, "Hope is the thing with feathers", although I'm obviously straining the motif at this point). Hope also appears in the guise of Dorothy, one of a few *Wizard of Oz* references in the film (there's also ruby slippers and a cameo from Margaret Hamilton). I'm not sure why Altman included these – another man-bird meld would be the flying monkeys, I guess – but it could be to remind us that the whole film is 'only a story' (hence the narrator). I'll go along with this until the film's closing credits, which abruptly introduces a circus troupe to present the cast, because I think it detracts from the film's conclusion. Perhaps Altman didn't want viewers to think his black comedy had gotten too cynical. There's touches of that, but there's also humor and contemplation. Even though this isn't one of his better-known films I still find the

scene of Brewster circling the Astrodome in flight one of Altman's most enduring images.

THE 'BURBS (1989) 97m. Director Joe Dante has an affection for small-town communities, even when he's unleashing all manner of havoc upon them. It's evident in his films, and is the subject of his 1991 television series *Eerie, Indiana*. It should come as no surprise, then, to see his helming of *The 'Burbs*, a film devoted to this subject. The story takes place in the suburb of Hinkley Hills, where enigmatic, unseen neighbors have just moved into the rundown house next door to a happily 'normal' married couple played by Tom Hanks and Carrie Fisher. Egged on by a couple of his neighbors, Hanks' views about the new arrivals escalate to paranoid heights.

The 'Burbs runs out of steam before the end, as the more recognizable idiosyncrasies of suburbia in the opening sequences give way to situations that become increasingly outlandish, preventing the film from becoming the definitive statement on suburban neuroses that many moviegoers were no doubt hoping for. But if *The 'Burbs* doesn't live up to its premise, it still works effectively as a kind of goofy homage to suburbanites. Dante's tendency towards cartoonish fantasy planes all satirical edges off the story: the neighborhood he gives us is the type of communal playground we would have liked to remember as children; a place of eccentric, comical inhabitants (Bruce Dern, Rick Ducommun, and Corey Feldman, to name a few), a weird gothic house (placed right in the middle of a cul-de-sac!), friendly feuding, spying, night-time strolls, and intrigue. The film ends with the enthusiastic line "I love this street", and by that time it's easy to share the sentiment: we realize that these characters belong in their suburban niche.

As with other Dante films, *The 'Burbs* is rife with references to films and television – and his entire neighborhood set seems to be a product of that as much as any other source. Feldman invites friends over to watch a scene unfolding on the street as if it were part of a movie (which it is), and describes the activities of his neighbors to a date as if they were characters in a story (which they are). One of my favorite sequences is nothing more than a walk down a path, which Dante shoots in flinty-eyed Sergio Leone-style closeups. It would be hard not to think that the cast must have had a ball making the movie – even Dern plays it strictly for laughs, for a change. I can't help thinking it would come over better late at night at a drive-in. A good companion piece would be the surreal 1981 film *Neighbors*. Other faces on the street include Henry Gibson, Gale Gordon, and Dante regulars Robert Picardo and Dick Miller. Jerry Goldsmith contributed the score, which, in keeping with the film's in-joke style, drops in themes from his soundtrack for *Patton*.

BUTCH AND SUNDANCE: THE EARLY DAYS (1979) 110m. How do you make a sequel to a film in which the two lead characters have been gunned down in a shootout? The answer, as 20th Century Fox figured, was to make it a prequel (an innovation at the time, but one which would become a standard ploy in the years to come). Fox obviously felt there was more dollar potential to be milked from their 1969 hit *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (a winner for stars Paul Newman and Robert Redford), but it was another ten years before Allan Burns took up the reins as scriptwriter and delivered this modest, good-humored western. Realizing that it would be impossible for 'name' stars to replace Redford and Newman, the producers opted instead for relative newcomers William Katt and Tom Berenger, who had previously featured in a dozen films between them. The tidy directing job undertaken by Richard Lester, location photography by Laszlo Kovac, and easygoing performances by Katt (Sundance) and Berenger (Cassidy), make the result enjoyable on every level. While *The Early Days* has Lester's sure touch, it doesn't look like a 'typical' Lester effort – I suspect he decided to forego his usual edgy, improvisational choreography after seeing dailies of Kovac's beautifully photographed scenery.

As the title suggests, the story is little more than a series of adventures, recounting the meeting of Butch and Sundance and the start of their friendship/partnership. From scene one, however, you won't be able to shake the feeling that Berenger is not trying to play the part of Cassidy as much as he is trying to persuade us that he is Newman. Wisely,

the beginning of the film concentrates on his character so that by the time Sundance appears we have accepted Berenger in the Cassidy role. We can enjoy watching their escapades once their rapport has been established because this time, at least, we know that they will not be killed off at the end. And the screenplay thankfully avoids the trap of resorting to Writing-for-Movies Plan B: 'When audience knows lead characters are in no danger, provide loved ones or long-time friends to kill off in tragic manner'. Lester and Burns come up with many quirky spins on familiar standards (this is the only western I've seen with ski-ing in it!), including the bank holdup, the gunfight, and, of course, the train robbery. The most redeeming feature of *The Early Days* is that it does not try to be a phoney epic or copy scenes of the film that spawned it, as most sequels generally tend to do. Lester similarly avoids making it nostalgic or sentimental. Like its predecessor, it ends on a freeze-frame – otherwise it resists any ironic in-jokes pointing to the 1969 production. Favorite moment: Cassidy's hastily-invented nickname for the as-yet-unnamed Sundance. Supporting players include Brian Dennehy, Jill Eikenberry and Peter Weller (introduced as La Force, their nemesis of the earlier film).

CANDY (1968) 115m. Oh, those 60s. This extravagant version of the novel by Terry Southern and Mason Hoffenberg is a lot of fun when seen with an audience in a theater; on television it may seem fairly pointless. It has great curio value because it is so patently a product of its time – witness its wild editing, camp atmosphere, and rock soundtrack. But more importantly notice its playfulness – we really don't care that we see the entire film crew reflected in a giant mirror near the end, because it seems so appropriate for the era. At a time when directors and actors were turning the lens back on to themselves to deliberately break through the 'fourth wall' of the cinema and remind us all that 'it's only a movie' it was inevitable that several 60s productions would turn out embarrassingly trite or pretentious. Not so *Candy* – like its heroine it is infused with a sense of reckless innocence. Sure, it's self-indulgent and paints its satire with a broad brush, but if anything it could be even more fun to watch now than it was in its own time.

Both the novel and film are slim reworkings of Voltaire's 'Candide', which dealt with the misadventures of a youth in a society of dubious philosophy, religion, and morality. The update is irrelevant for the film experience – as a screenplay *Candy* could have been invented purely for the cinema (it certainly had to abandon the more pornographic elements of the book). Swedish teenager Ewa Aulin plays the title character in a suitably vacant manner (it's hard to tell whether she can act or not because she is only given one sentence at a time, and it is nearly always a reaction or a question); consequently it's easy to pass over how well she fits the role. She really does capture an oblivious aspect of Candy that prevents us from being truly annoyed with her. It's just as well, because take a look at who she's up against – a bombastic, lecherous Richard Burton, an egotistical, lecherous James Coburn, and guru-like, lecherous Marlon Brando. Throw in John Astin, Ringo Starr, Walter Matthau (all lecherous) and a few extras including an Italian director and a hunchback, and you'll see that Candy barely manages to get a word in edgeways. At the time of *Candy'*s release some critics saw the involvement of big-name stars as an embarrassment worth celebrating in their columns, but as is most often the case with such things the film has endured while the notices have been forgotten – modern audiences don't mind seeing Brando and Burton play-acting instead of method acting.

Of course, Candy is no spokesperson for any women's movement, and with very little correlation between her constant disrobing and the story's satirical comment (against the military, the police, the literati, religion, the medical profession, and even film-making) she appears as a very doubtful heroine indeed. In some ways she is like the title character of *Barbarella* (also released in 1968, and with a screenplay by Southern) and the cosmic visions that open and close the film allude to her as a traveler

through space and time, journeying from one outlandish event to another, sampling each in turn. For this reason I don't see Aulin's Candy as being a victim but rather an observer – most importantly, she appears unchanged by any of her liaisons except the last, at which point she has seen enough and transcends her own status of a character, almost literally walking out of her own movie to find re-invention elsewhere. Is Candy an extra-terrestrial visitor? It would explain her naiveté but not her background – unless her family and school are also fabrications. Fortunately such speculation is brushed over lightly, sidestepping likely charges of pretension against the film (I don't know if this idea is presented in the novel). This is less brain candy than it is eye candy. It would make a good double bill with *The Magic Christian*, if only because of the involvement of Ringo and Southern in both, but then again that might be a tad too much for one sitting! It looks and sounds great in a cinema, so watch for prints in revival houses.

CATCH-22 (1970) 121m. There is a danger in producing films that take on 'big themes', especially if they spring from masterfully written source material: they give more for the critics to pick over. Despite much praise for his first two features, stage-director-turned-film-director Mike Nichols was unable to avoid dismissive reviews for his much-anticipated film version of Joseph Heller's classic anti-war novel, but perhaps filmgoers were expecting too much – if not the impossible. As anyone who has read the book can tell you, adapting Heller's labyrinthine work for the screen would be a monumental task for even the most seasoned of film-makers. It's time to give Nichols his due: he and writer Buck Henry (who also appears in the film) manage to retain the novel's panoply of characters and distinctive blend of satire, philosophy, farce, and horror. Nichols also makes an effort to retain the mood of the book by casting Alan Arkin in the pivotal role of Yossarian – his charismatic performance effectively guides the audience through the fractured narrative of Heller's story.

In essence, *Catch-22* is about Yossarian, a bombardier trapped in a WWII airforce base situated on a Mediterranean island. He wants out of the war, but the army has conveniently provided a loophole - catch-22 - that will prevent him from ever leaving until they are through with him. The circular logic of this catch is Heller's metaphor for the self-serving logic of the military in wartime, and Nichols exploits its farcical nature for all it's worth, keeping much of Heller's giddy dialogue intact. Sometimes it's hard to tell if a scene is being played straight or for laughs, and Nichols confounds this further by compiling a staggering cast of actors both comic (Bob Newhart, Richard Benjamin, Norman Fell, Jack Gilford) and dramatic (Martin Balsam, Anthony Perkins, Jon Voight - memorable as Milo Minderbinder - Martin Sheen, and Orson Welles, who was offered the part of General Dreedle after being beaten to the punch by Nichols in adapting Heller's book for the screen). Who plays who isn't really important anyhow: each character is so wound up in their own private routines, schemes, or enterprises that they remain oblivious of their absurd situation. It's only Yossarian, who appears to be in a state of extreme agitation throughout the film, that really seems to know what's going on – but as he is brainwashed by the eponymous catch-22 even he can't be sure whether or not he is crazy.

As would be expected from Nichols, performances from the cast are fine all round, but he also uses his setting to explore cinematic territory unavailable in the domestic scenarios of his earlier films. He uses every inch of the wide-screen frame to good effect – this is definitely one to see in a cinema. It's by turns hilarious, shocking, and surreal. Art Garfunkel, Paula Prentiss, Charles Grodin, Bob Balaban round out the rest of the principal cast.

CAVEMAN (1981) 92m. An engaging, low-budget flick (how much money do you need to make a caveman film anyway?) shot in Mexico by director Carl Gottlieb. It was one of Ringo Starr's more appealing roles – aside from interesting projects like *The Magic Christian* and *That'll be the Day*, he had weird cameos in films like *200 Motels* and *Lisztomania*. In *Caveman*, Ringo's doleful expression and shambling posture win us over from the start (I'm sure many a critic remarked at the time that the ex-Beatle's best acting performance to date didn't require him to speak). Even though there is no

dialogue in the film we learn that he is Atouk, a member of a tribe ruled by the burly, formidable Tonda (Oaklands Raider pro John Matuszak). Dissatisfied with life in the tribe – and frustrated by his desire for Tonda's mate Lana (Barbara Bach, looking very sexy in furs) – he sets off on his own and gradually meets other loners. Together they form their own tribe of outsiders. Traditionally, in most 'serious' movies of this genre, a supposed misfit is ejected from the tribe and is eventually adopted into a more enlightened tribal society. Here it's the opposite – Ringo's group is a proud mixture of minorities, yet they're the ones who discover fire, music, and the world's largest poached egg, while the more traditional/conformist group gets nowhere. By no means are you expected to draw any serious subtexts from these scenes – the group's accidental discoveries are played for laughs, though do get a little predictable after a while. One of my favorite moments occurs when Ringo and friend Dennis Quaid simultaneously 'learn' to walk erect and then immediately shrug off thoughts of returning to their less evolved former tribe leader.

Unfortunately, *Caveman* resorts to physical comedy for its final act (the story starts taking weird turns when Quaid's character disappears down a river), and its lazy incorporation of classical tunes into the soundtrack is a little irritating, but it's still one of the more watchable cave-people movies. Animator David Allen, whose creatures are generally better than the low-budget films they appear in, creates some comic dinosaurs that look as good as any found in major studio pictures of the time. The simple vocabulary invented for the film consists of character names and a few verbs and nouns – you'll easily pick up the words for love, fire, monster, and others. In one of the film's funniest elements, Evan Kim plays an Asian who cannot communicate with the other tribe members because of a language barrier – guess which language he speaks! It's a good film for a group of young children to watch (one word may need to be bleeped) because its wordless presentation is bound to get them explaining the subtleties of the storyline to each other. It's also fun for older viewers to see the pre-Hollywood lives of some of the cast being duplicated on screen: former model Bach strikes a number of alluring poses on her bed, football player Matuszak finds himself on the receiving end of a dogpile, and drummer Ringo gets to join in an improv session around his tribe's newly-invented campfire. He would go on to marry Bach shortly after production wrapped on the movie. You won't have to watch it for too long to see why!

CHAINED FOR LIFE (1951) 61m. My first real exposure to the genre of 'exploitation' came about when I was in high school and Tod Browning's *Freaks* ran for a limited engagement in an indie cinema. It intrigued me enough to spend years seeking out *Chained for Life*, a B-grader that featured the conjoined twins Violet and Daisy Hilton from Browning's earlier film. To me, this was exploitation even more direct than in *Freaks*: rather than scatter our observations over a number of different startling human exhibitions, *Chained for Life* took one condition in particular and played it to the hilt. Or Hilton. The Hilton Sisters play the Hamilton Sisters (at the addition of a couple of letters, this is no acting stretch so far), third-rate performers in a third-rate vaudeville show. Things get complicated when one of them falls for the oily charms of a sharpshooter who wants to use his association with the twins to become the headline act. It all ends with a murder rap and an attorney putting forward their case with uncommon legal sensitivity by asking the court "Are these monstrosities or are they human beings?"

As separation procedures are performed nowadays while twins are still young, the condition of conjoined adults is even rarer in this time than when *Chained* was first made. Browning did raise a few quirky questions about the phenomenon in *Freaks*, but the writer and director of *Chained* stake out supposedly serious territory to justify our own morbid fascination in the subject – in true road show fashion, the film is introduced by an authority (in this case a judge, though doctors and psychiatrists usually show up in these prologues too) whose sober demeanour informs us that we are not watching an exploitation film while overlooking the lurid taglines ("How can they make love?") that drew audiences to the box office in the first place. The twins' sex life is an obvious marketing angle, but is more downplayed than you'd expect and a lot of screen time is spent on other actors in the cast. The short running time of the

film is further padded out with a number of variety acts, the Hiltons being the least interesting, and consequently least irritating, among them. The sisters recite a little philosophy about the unique nature of their existence but you have to wonder how much of it is really their own thoughts and how much of it is prose dreamed up by a scriptwriter, especially with dumb lines like "We've always said we were like other people, but different". There may have been no need for blatant or titillating 'Siamese Twin' scenes in any event – I find myself more distracted by watching the sisters do something as simple as stand up, walk across a room, and then sit down (who decides when they're going to get up?). One scene where a twin dreams of leaving her sister and then walks alone through a forest would have been a little more poignant if it didn't descend into a mawkish tryst, and if we didn't already know it was being played by a body double. No pun intended.

Oh, all right, pun intended. But anyway, *Chained*'s biggest failing point is that it does not engage us with the unique situation of the Hiltons. Although the film-makers use the sisters' condition to sell the movie, they don't really confront us with the reality of how or where the twins are joined or the physical compromises they must make. In fact, the twins, who aren't as identical as you'd expect (especially since their hair is dyed different colours) could really be played by any two actors wearing a collection of two-for-one costumes. The acting by the Hiltons isn't much worse than many other performances in the film (or worse than any other sisters named Hilton, for that matter), but as their physical state prevents them from looking at each other directly all of their dialogue is delivered with sidelong glances. Still, the twins do attract a measure of interest and sympathy simply by being on camera and without recourse to any of the film's exploitative interests, and you might be inspired to find out more about the real lives of the actors. The Hiltons' biography would have made a more interesting story for no other reason than it was true: abandoned, adopted, exploited and going through the same marriage problems as they did in the movie (they were refused a licence on moral grounds) they eventually played out the showbiz circuit and ended up flipping burgers and bagging groceries before succumbing to influenza. There will never be anyone quite like them again, nor, it stands to reason, a film quite like this one again. In light of this, *Chained for Life* was a one-shot chance, and the film-makers blew it.

CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY (2005) 115m. 1972's *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* was a relatively unknown property when it first appeared in cinemas. I say "relatively" because three decades later it is hard to imagine any child not being exposed to Roald Dahl's book somewhere along the line of their education. Gone now is the surprise of the factory with all its wonders, and the enigma of Willy Wonka himself, so what is there left for director Tim Burton and star Johnny Depp to work with? Unexpectedly, the remake follows the source material even more closely than the original (with the exception of flashback scenes – Willy Wonka does *not* need a backstory – provided as a lead-in to the story's altered ending), but still has to deal with the character made so memorable by Gene Wilder's distinctive turn in the original. The 1972 version's alteration of title from 'Charlie' to 'Willy Wonka' indicated who the film-makers thought would be the selling point of the movie: while the book allowed us to follow Charlie's journey through the mysterious Chocolate Factory, the film had Willy Wonka leading us by the nose.

It's only natural to expect the Factory itself to take center stage in any cinema adaptation, with Charlie having done his bit by getting us, the audience, in through the doors after the first act, and Wonka serving merely as tour guide. But if Charlie is upstaged by the factory, then the factory itself gets upstaged by Willy Wonka. In *Charlie*, Depp has done the unthinkable: after three previous collaborations with Burton in three completely different guises, he has stolen the movie from the director almost effortlessly. Fortunately, his Willy Wonka is a far remove from Wilder's, preserving the integrity of the original film for diehard fans who think remakes of classic cult movies are unnecessary. It's possible to enjoy both the 1972 and 2005 versions for what they are, thanks to the wonderful, singular performances by both actors. It's a tough call to say who is better, though I am inclined to side with Wilder, who makes

his Wonka just as elusive but a little more human than Depp's. Wilder plays the character as if he is a philanthropic genius who has become disappointed by society, doesn't suffer fools gladly, but nevertheless hasn't lost the gleam in his eye. Depp is a quirky recluse, driven into the confectionary biz by obsession, harboring a deep-seated dread of family, but nevertheless retaining the gleam in his teeth.

It's enjoyable seeing just what Depp brings to the table with each of his film performances, even if, as in this case, he plays a character so broadly that audiences are bound to be confused by it. The only time he steps back is to allow the Oompa-Loompas (or Oompa-Loompa, since it is one actor duplicated by computer) to indulge in catchy musical numbers – you would think that these scenes would be Burton's chance to steal attention away from Depp but instead they appear to be composer Danny Elfman's chance to grab the limelight. It doesn't matter that Depp goofs around with Wonka as some kind of kiddie-show host parody because there's almost no such thing as a subtle performance in this film. The children and their parents, unlike the 1972 version, are obnoxious to the core (Mike Teavea's dad is the only one who doesn't come off so badly), and Freddie Highsmith, who is stuck with the role of goody-goody Charlie, should be relieved that he comes off simply as "inoffensive".

Burton's films tend to fall into two categories – pop and gothic. Among his colorful, wacky excursions we have *Pee-Wee*, *Beetlejuice* and *Mars Attacks*, while among his darker, operatic tales we have *Batman*, *Sleepy Hollow* and *Edward Scissorhands*. He could have gone either way with *Charlie*; the potential for a much sinister film is obvious in the tone of Dahl's work. In truth, I don't think I would have minded Burton taking the darker route, even though there seems to be too many of those hues in children's films of the new millennium; but I think going light was the right choice. There is a lot to enjoy, and Depp has many funny asides. But really: yet another *2001* monolith joke in the 21st century, complete with the theme music, already? Aren't we past that stuff now? Why not have Depp do a riff on the shower scene from *Psycho* while we're at it? Pure Imagination...not!

THE CHELSEA GIRLS (1966) 195m. The best thing that came out of this gabfest was the title song recorded as an afterthought by Nico the following year on her debut album. Making good with his statement about everybody in the future having fifteen minutes of fame, Andy Warhol placed a camera in various rooms (some in NY's Chelsea Hotel) and had a bunch of his friends do or say whatever they could think of until it ran out of film (his excuse: he was commissioned to do it). It could have been a good idea, if any of them had talent or even the inclination to participate. As it is they mostly rag on one another, mutter, scream, sneer or just clam up (their excuse: they were high), giving the proceedings about as much impact as a videotape of your relatives in the kitchen, unless you describe 'impact' as attrition by three hours of split-screen ranting.

If some unknown schmuck had made this movie it would have barely earned a second glance, but because it's Warhol it has seen much discussion. It's art! It's anti-art! It's voyeurism! Art as voyeurism! Social documentation! Snapshots of the underground drug scene! A redefining of film aesthetics! How about just another Warhol put-on? I can't believe the eulogizing this film has generated – as if nobody had ever before thought of turning a camera on someone and letting it roll uninterrupted; as if the minimalism of the enterprise was supposed to be a spit in the eye of cinema hegemony; as if these voices from the margins had never been heard before. I'm all for independent film, but it bugs me that anti-projects such as this come built-in with their own failsafe, i.e. if they lie beyond conventional cinema boundaries then they lie beyond critical ones. For example, it could be argued that the voices in *Chelsea Girls* have nothing to say (as raconteurs, quite simply, they suck); however the rebuttal is that the very point of the film is that no-one has anything to say, or if they do, that they are incapable of articulating it. Well, I've spread baloney as thin as the next guy in a number of academic discourses and I always circle back to Orwell's comment that there are some things so absurd that only an intellectual could believe them. Warhol may have made his name as an artist but in time he became more famous simply for being

famous, confounding critics who weren't sure how to separate the contexts of art and celebrity. The creation and reception of *Chelsea Girls* has far more to say about fame than it has about film. On those grounds, at least, it is significant.

As unwieldy as *Chelsea Girls* may be it attracted a much larger audience than other films of the avant-garde, although I suspect it was the novelty of the simultaneous projection that caught people's attention. One theory behind the split-screen gimmick was that if you found one frame boring then you could look at the other instead. Good idea, but it doesn't take into account that usually both frames are boring, lending credence to the second theory that it was to reduce the film's six-hour running time by half. Warhol's directorial style (a paradoxical term, as his style was to offer no direction) was the basis for all his early improvisational films, but is wasted here on a largely talentless collection of Factory cohorts (or Factory rejects). When left to improvise, the subjects largely repeat the comments of others, who in turn keep rewording their own statements *ad nauseum*. After twelve reels of talking heads there's still nothing as memorable as the moment in *Women in Revolt* where a man's pubic hair accidentally catches alight after a girl throws a match at him. But if watching some guy talk about sweat for ten minutes turns you on, then by all means, check it out.

CIRCLE OF IRON (1979) 95m. David Carradine plays more than one role in this martial arts fantasy, but mainly features as a blind wanderer who carries a four-foot flute and dispenses koans to wannabe hero Jeff Cooper. Cooper, who plays a brash muscleman named Cord, is seeking the path that will lead him to the Book of Enlightenment. Starting off in what appears to be a Tibetan monastary (with Roddy MacDowall in a piece of miscasting worthy of the musical *Lost Horizon*), *Circle of Iron*'s B-movie intimations are first made apparent upon utterance of Cooper's booming, impossible American accent. Playing the barbarian-as-tourist, Cooper meets up not only with Carradine (and Carradine, and Carradine, and Carradine) but also a mixture of Mongols, Tartars, Berbers, and an elderly Hebrew couple who have strayed in from the biblical epic next door. This oddball Kung Fu (or more accurately, Kung Flute) movie has surprisingly little violence and disappointingly little to offer in the way of martial arts. As neither Carradine or Cooper are sufficiently proficient fighters, their combat scenes aren't terribly exciting – Carradine was obviously picked because of his role in TV's *Kung Fu*, while Cooper's trademark seems to be to strike defensive poses with his hands as if he's preparing to make shadow puppets.

Circle of Iron has a low-rent atmosphere despite its technical polish, but its most striking feature is the careless *mise-en-scene* that permeates the entire picture – personally I found it jarring to hear an irrelevant blast of Susato's *Pavane Bataille* inside a cave of monkey-men! It's as if the film-makers were given a surplus of props and costumes and went to town with them. Ironically, this total lack of unity (it was filmed in Israel, just to add to the overall dislocation) could be seen not as the movie's greatest liability, but as its asset. It really does enforce the feeling of an alternate world. Fortunately, the film doesn't take itself seriously and Carradine gets some good one-liners. I don't think it lives up to Bruce Lee's original story concept however (he died before it went into production), and instead of any real explanation about the true meaning of the Book the conclusion just throws in a pat pseudo-philosophical punchline. If anything, the story lazily perpetuates the idea that those who have Ultimate Knowledge also have the right to beat up anybody who wants to ask them about it.

CITY OF HOPE (1991) 129m. This mosaic by John Sayles is reflective of his versatility by virtue of its multifarious nature. Sayles, a writer-director-actor-editor, makes pains to experiment with as wide a genre and mood available to him in the landscape of commercial cinema. At first glance, *City of Hope* might seem his most 'ordinary': a story of the effect of corrupt politics and business on different socio-economic levels. Straightforward enough, but Sayles wants to provide as broad a spectrum as possible into his two-hour running time, so his constantly mobile camera drifts in and out of the lives of a huge cast of characters. Some provide subplots that rhizomatically link together; some nudge each other in passing; yet others function only

as incidental bystanders. It's a great dance that Sayles choreographs – he obviously finds enjoyment in the immeasurable ways in which people affect each others' lives. *City of Hope* has obvious parallels with Robert Altman efforts like *Nashville* and *Short Cuts*, but Sayles' approach touches base on a more human level. His characters are for the most part plain speaking and down to earth, and get an equal amount of screen time (Vincent Spano has a little more than the rest of the thirty-plus cast, giving him the film's nominal lead role).

It seems an obvious idea to tell the story of a city by using a plenitude of voices instead of a sole representative one, but there aren't many films like this one around. Sayles shows us that it is this chorus that unites to provide the one voice of the city itself. In *City of Hope* the people take center stage: the city has no name; its streets are simply named after letters of the alphabet; we never see an establishing shot of the city; much of the story is filmed at street level (when we do see a view out of a high-rise, it's only of the building opposite); the characters all work in service of the city to keep its various mechanisms in running order. When Spano quits his construction job in the film's opening scene, he is setting himself up for a fall: without any useful function for the city he automatically becomes expendable – he fails to emulate the example of several other characters who want to be recognized as separate identities in their community (Sayles has everyone use each other's first name repeatedly). It's hard to tell if this is a city of hope or a city of hopelessness: like the building left unfinished halfway through the story, the separate storylines remain largely unresolved. Sayles gets away with this by treating them in such a fragmentary manner that we don't really expect all the loose ends to tie up anyhow. The closing shot is inspired – it may linger in your memory for days afterwards.

THE CLAN OF THE CAVE BEAR (1986) 100m. Not even writer John Sayles could save this version of Jean Auel's overblown prehistoric soap opera, but at least he knew well enough not to direct it. The film covers the events of the first volume of Auel's saga, which grew ever more ridiculous by the book, but doesn't distinguish itself from many other cave-people movies. As always, there is one member of the tribe that is a little smarter than the others who ends up ostracized or outcast. In this case, it's Ayla (Daryl Hannah), a Cro-Magnon who is adopted by a tribe of Neanderthals while a young girl. She takes up with the tribe's shaman and medicine woman, and learns to fend for herself. Much of this is to the consternation of the uptight chief's son Broud, next in line for leadership of the tribe and in need of a good dose of primal scream therapy. The premise of one Cro-Magnon co-existing with Neanderthals is a promising one, set as it is within a fascinating nexus of human history (the Neanderthals rely on race memory, while Ayla is able to learn new concepts as they arise), but fails to deliver. Unfortunately, there is outwardly too little that separates Ayla from the tribe. Sure, she's blonde and statuesque, but she's also Daryl Hannah, so naturally she's going to stand out regardless of who she's with, especially if they're a cast of non-star players (look out for a young, pre-*Baywatch* Nicole Eggert as the teenage incarnation of Ayla).

The film's major failing point is that it's simply not authentic enough (despite Auel's intensively-researched source material and the technical credit 'Primitive Skill Training'!)): The cave dwellers of *Clan* end up being nothing more than a bunch of actors in fluffy wigs, Hannah's teeth are too perfect, and the film overlooks the inconvenient fact that the average lifespan of a caveman was 18. Instead of filming it in beautiful British Columbia, the film-makers could have opted for a grittier look. Rather than pitch for a PG audience, they could have presented the living conditions of the primitives in a harsher light, with nature red in tooth and claw (Bart the bear, who was terrifically ferocious in *The Edge*, once again gives the best performance in the cast). *Clan* seems like a catalogue of second-best decisions, but it could have been worse, and the film-makers did at least get one thing right: they elected to tell their story through subtitles and voice-over narration rather than have the actors grunt their way through the dialogue. And it does improve on the book in one respect – it takes only an hour and a half to get through. Still, Jean Jacques-Annaud covered the same ground with more integrity in *Quest for Fire*, and if you pitted the two tribes from those films

together, it would be a pretty safe bet that the *Clan* group would have the living coprolite beaten out of them.

CLOVERFIELD (2008) 85m. With the proliferation of mobile phones and pocket-sized digital cameras, it seems impossible for anything in the 21st century to go undocumented. When the Hindenburg crashed in 1937 the event was immortalized with a single iconic image of it crippled and aflame despite the high presence of newsreel cameras, but when hijacked jet airliners plowed into the World Trade Center in 2001, news agencies found that they could edit comprehensive coverage of the disaster from citizens' personal video cameras. The brilliantly realized premise of *Cloverfield* is to use the unquestionably 'real' credentials of amateur home video to frame the perspective of an imaginary event on a scale seen only in films like *Godzille, King Kong*, and *Independence Day*. It's a gimmick that had been been done before, most notably in 1999's *The Blair Witch Project*, but for reasons of budget more than aesthetics. The point of such strategy is to exploit the home-made look of amateur video to present fiction as if it were documentary. With the huge FX budget of *Cloverfield* and the quality of the cinematography, there's no way it was ever going to succeed as realism, but as a cinematic conceit it holds up very well. In fact, the 'rehearsed spontaneity' of the camerawork is probably too authentic for many viewers (there were complaints of seasickness from some audience members after seeing the camera shaking on big cinema screens).

The opening title of the film reveals 'Cloverfield' to be the code name used for a military operation implemented during an attack on Manhattan, which is almost an in-joke, as the film itself was known only as 'Untitled J. J. Abrams Project' until a short time before its theatrical release, allowing those who were first in line to share the same sense of discovery as the protagonists in the film. Early speculation was that the film might have been a *Godzilla* remake, so the tipoffs early in the story (a closeup of a Japanese flag and news that a ship is the first victim of the invader) are more likely to be misinformation jokes rather than homage. Following Joe Bob Briggs' "first rule of drive-in moviemaking" that anyone can die at any time, the team behind *Cloverfield* pulls no punches, and any doubts about exactly what happens in the film's final moments can be addressed by referring back to the opening few seconds. By populating the cast with lesser-known actors, everyone becomes as expendable as any cross-section of the population during a random cataclysmic event. Viewers may become so absorbed with the seemingly on-the-fly style of the film that they may not even notice the total absence of a background score (a necessary condition of filming it on a camcorder – presumably if Abrams had produced the original *Star Wars* we wouldn't have heard laser blasts hitting spaceships either). Instead, *Cloverfield* uses a soundtrack of *musique concrete*, driving the story along with booming footfalls, the hysteria of crowds and the clash and clatter of the military in constant battle with the enemy. Similarly, the film/video does its job so effectively that you might not even notice the level of language being used by every character within earshot. If it had been me holding that camera on the firing line, the expletives would have been well beyond a PG rating.

CONFESSIONS OF AN OPIUM EATER (1962) 85m. I'm guessing that June Kim was given a small role in John Carpenter's *Big Trouble in Little China* as homage to this 1962 Albert Zugsmith production, which in all likelihood served as its inspiration. *Confessions* isn't as well known as Zugsmith's other exploitation movies, but for my money it's the best of them. As you may have already figured, the story has nothing to do with the 18th-century autobiography by Thomas De Quincey. Instead, it falls back on that old matinee serial standard, the oriental slave trade. Like the Carpenter film, *Confessions* features a hero (Vincent Price) searching for a girl (Kim) in the haphazard labyrinth of chambers and passageways that form the tong underworld of San Francisco's Chinatown. Where these movies differ is that *Trouble* is a comic action piece while *Confessions* is eerie and somnolent.

I prefer the distributor's alternate title *Souls for Sale*, which advertises the film's sinister proceedings right from the opening credits. The wordless prologue sets the mood effectively, and the nightmarish atmosphere and selective absence of live sounds

establish the dislocated world that will reveal more of itself to us throughout the course of the movie. In *Confessions* values are turned upside down: we are shown the underbelly of humankind where people are caged, starved, doped, and disappear through secret passageways, trapdoors and sewers as if they were rats creeping from one cramped hidey-hole to the next. Price's solution for dealing with this surreal situation is to cloud himself with opium at the first opportunity, which is kind of redundant, given that the insular environment is a physical extension of an opiate high anyway. Surprisingly, the film maintains its distorted atmosphere until the predictable action of the last act. Fortunately, it concludes on the just the bizarre note we'd hope for (it's not every film that ends with characters spouting philosophy while being washed down the sewers).

I find parts of *Confessions* disturbing and even shocking. It seems to be languid and fatalistic about its inherent cruelty – as if we were viewing the moral decay through the same miasmic state as the opium addicts that inhabit its world. Sensibilities are conflicted, at once casual and premeditated, somehow both distanced and reinforced by the odd tone of the screenplay. It's also hard to pin down exactly what is happening in this story, given the way that the characters talk. The fortune-cookie dialogue is philosophical, interrupted at odd beats with colloquialisms, and pretty much constructed of someone quoting a metaphor and then having someone else pick it up and run with it. Price's towering presence, soft-spoken voice, and seafaring garb should make him a complete foreigner in this environment (many times he is crouched, lying down, or stooped, to show us that he patently doesn't fit in there), but throughout his performance we have the feeling that he has been in these places before, and is withholding from us. I've always thought of Price as an unusual lead in any of his non-horror roles, so in that respect he's right at home in this twisted tale (he never raises a sweat and manages to keep his hat on for almost the entire movie). Many other characters flit in and out of his passage through the criminal underworld, most notably Yvonne Moray (perfect as a midget who is insouciant about her fate) and Linda Ho, who demonstrates in one slow, smoldering approach to the camera that she could have become one of the screen's great villains if she'd landed a few Hollywood roles. Zugsmith was a little off with his timing when he released this movie – if he'd made it a few years later it would have hit the rise of the hallucinogenic drug craze and tapped in to a whole new audience.

CUBE (1997) 91m. The less you know about this one beforehand, the better: avoid all video slicks, talkative friends, and careless reviewers. This is engrossing science fiction that, once seen, is not easily forgotten. In fact it really should be seen only once and then left to linger for years in the memory. *Cube* opens with a group of strangers awakening to find themselves in a square room with identical doors set in the walls, floor, and ceiling. Each door in turn leads to another room of the same design. It's tempting to think that because each character has been roused from sleep *Cube* is merely a dream or hallucination, but no: its story generates tension because what happens to the people in it is horribly real despite the absence of any rationale. We are put in the characters' place, unaware of the meaning of the scenario while trying to puzzle it out as best we can. But there's little time for us to think independently – the screenplay (by Andre Bijelic, Graeme Manson, and director Vincenzo Natali) moves us along at a relentless pace. The claustrophobic setting and faceless appearance of each character (they wear drab prison outfits) become hypnotic after a while; because they do nothing but move, sleep, and die it's about as purely existential an experience as you can find in cinema. The writers are smart enough not to have their characters pontificate on these themes however – the premise does well enough alone without having 'meaningful' dialogue thrown in to remind us what it stands for. As would be expected, there is the usual cross-grouping of character types to provide confrontation, but even these provide no anchor for our viewing sensibilities – characters change, sometimes in an instant. Heroes, villains, defeatists, and pragmatists all switch among each other – every character in turn is brave, fearful, angry, and calm. Only one thing is certain – they are all expendable.

Cube has many offbeat, humorous lines and moments but is also uncomortably tense at times – we are

alerted early into the film that the labyrinth is a sadistic death trap. One scene, in which there is no sound for several minutes, is unbearable to watch in a cinema (and strange as it may seem – given the limiting nature of its sets – this really is a film to be seen in a cinema). Yet the major irony of the story is that the characters brutalize each other more than the sinister machinations of the Cube – in fact this is taken to excess near the film's conclusion, and is the only misstep the screenwriters make. Otherwise *Cube* is a perfect blend of thought and action. You can sense the devilish fun that Natali and friends must have had assembling their intricate game – was this dreamed up by a frustrated Rubik's Cube owner?? Sensibly, the impressive effects are used only when needed. Wonderfully edited, photographed, and directed (especially considering the limitations of the setting). The cast, who provide the humanity – and inhumanity – central to our involvement with the story, command our attention on screen. It's hard to say who stands out, but my pick would be Nicole de Boer (as a student who makes maths look pretty cool and exciting!), a determined Maurice Dean Wint, and Andrew Miller, as the least likely companion of the others.

DAMNED RIVER (1989) 91m. 1972's *Deliverance* was pretty much the last word on civilization-vs-wilderness pictures, but this didn't discourage many imitations. In this one, four friends travel to Africa for a week-long rafting vacation down the Zambesi. Their brusque guide Raymond (Stephen Shellen) treats them at first with indifference, then contempt. As the water gets wilder, so does Raymond – he snaps at his passengers and then snaps in his mind. Yes, the storyline is standard exploitation fare but tries for better. Shellen has a few good lines and he's amusing when yelling abuse at the rafting party without regard about how they might be 'feeling' about the whole experience (you get the impression that this was written by river guides as a revenge fantasy for every this-wasn't-in-the-brochure whining customer they've had to take on board). The cinematography (all filmed on location in Zimbabwe) is good, and director Michael Schroeder makes an effort to keep things visually interesting.

The weight of the film falls on Shellen's shoulders, and he does a reasonable job. It makes sense that we're supposed to link Shellen with the wilderness as a contrast to the controlled behavior of his passengers, but he seems trapped in a middle zone, neither truly natural/savage enough to belong completely to the river nor domestic/ethical enough to belong with the others of his party. Note that Shellen follows every unexpected or violent act with an explanation, excuse, or justification. Clearly the moral code he operates on is completely his own – that's why I don't think this film works at any potential allegorical level. It's easy enough to explain Shellen's behavior by passing him off as a confused war veteran, but when his passengers refuse to fight fire with fire ("we're better than him") the film only makes a statement about one individual rather than a general human condition. I know this kind of conjecture seems a little overwrought for this type of movie, but that's what makes *Damned River* interesting. I like the idea underpinning the film – that a group of people are forced to depend entirely on someone erratic and dangerous – and it would have paid to highlight this angle in deference to letting Shellen go over the top so soon. With a tighter script *Damned River* could have been considerably better; with any less production value it could have been a lot worse. It's an exploitation film that doesn't come across as an exploitation film, but it doesn't really make it to 'legit' status either. It is like its central character, trapped in a middle zone. As river rapid ratings go, this would be a 'Class 3' movie. That's somewhere between *The River Wild* and *Race For Your Life, Charlie Brown.* And just for the record, crocodile does *not* taste like chicken. Who keeps spreading this stuff around?

DARK CITY (1998) 103m. Writer-director

Alex Proyas' followup to *The Crow* (which in itself could have been titled *Dark City*). Its most striking feature, like its predecessor, is its sepulchral photography, although *Dark City* may be even darker (but at least without all that rain): it seems that every wall is painted black or grey, every shadow overwhelms the light sources within the frame, every character is etched in chiaroscuro. It's not just a noir gimmick. Like the startling visual effects, the look of the film is entirely in service with its storyline: the titular city is part machine, part terrarium, part psychoid unconscious. It's as Jung would have dreamed it himself – a place where the basic stories of our world might begin with a singular creative experience.

The city's governorship is in the hands of powerful beings known only as The Strangers (imagine a costume party where everyone shows up as Nosferatu and you'll get the basic idea), who impose mandatory hibernation periods upon its human residents. It's when one of the citizens (Rufus Sewell) remains awake that the film begins. Thenceforth a lot of strange stuff happens in *Dark City*, and Proyas stretches out the intrigue for just the right length. Its arresting visuals and thundering soundtrack – this film must be heard in a cinema, not just seen in one – drive its narrative at a compelling pace, although the purely cinematic environment of it all makes Sewell and the other actors hardly memorable; only Keifer Sutherland's mannered performance stands out afterwards, for better or worse.

The most noticeable thing about *Dark City* is that it makes perfect sense as an experience, but not as a story. Here we have an alien gestalt capable of manifesting its consciousness; for all intents and purposes they appear invulnerable. Yet they may be felled by a blow to the head just as easily as any of the humans in their charge, which makes you wonder that if the aliens had this kind of power then why wouldn't they arm themselves with psychically-generated rocket launchers instead of their less effective psychically-generated knives? But it would do just as well to question why, in a dream, you see yourself flattened under a truck loaded with baked beans only to be relocated in front of a classroom of talking raccoons a split second later (this may be a stupid example, but at least it's a real dream). Putting it plainly, to question the logic of this film is simply unsporting. Pick at one loose thread and you'll find that the story's entire fabric is made entirely of the same. Nevertheless, Proyas makes the bold choice of establishing the feel of a 1940s detective movie, thus providing us with characters that are investigating his project's own meaning. Admirable, when you realize it would have been a lot simpler for him to take a leaf out of David Lynch's book and cite the illogic of dreams as his nightmarish film's *raison d'etre*.

When I was a kid I used to drive myself crazy thinking about the universe - how big it was, where it ended, if it ended, what it was in when it ended (a bubble, maybe? If so, what was the bubble floating in?). There were times when *Dark City* reminded me of that feeling. It's a metanarrative intrigue into those huge creative spaces: the fabrication of storylines and scenarios, the endless possibilities and invention of characters and their relationships. We're outside looking in, but at the same time there's a sense that this film has come from somewhere within and is projecting itself out. It's easy to backtrack and point out a film history from which the architecture of *Dark City* may have emerged but the only necessary base for comparison is much more primal: namely, our own dark cities. You know the ones. Just like in the film, they're torn down and rebuilt every night in our sleep.

DARKTOWN STRUTTERS (1974) 84m. You wouldn't expect a film this irreverent and slapdash to be the swan song of a veteran like William Witney, who started making cowboy serials in the 30s and worked his way through every genre available until wrapping up with this goofy blaxploitation flick for Gene Corman. It's the kind of movie that begs the "X meets Y" formula of summarizing. For example: It's Pam Grier meets a *Batman* TV episode. Or maybe it's Biker Chicks in Louisville meet *The Banana Splits*. Or…maybe it's just its own thing. *Darktown Strutters* is made up of everything you've ever seen, which in turn makes it look like nothing you've ever seen.

Like many other exploitation genres of the 70s, Blaxploitation films would often give a wink or a nod to the audience to acknowledge their mercenary agenda but wouldn't surrender themselves to outright

self-mockery. Although they would often open with energy, anarchy, or cocky humor, most films of the genre would soon settle down to a more straight-laced portrayal of their characters, settings, and situations. *Darktown Strutters* kicks off with four biker girls (who look like they beamed in from the planet Disco) getting into a pie fight with the local cops. This is a silly yet still salvageable beginning but at the moment that a police car with an absurdly oversized siren enters the frame, there is no possible return to reality.

Trina Parks plays the leader of the Darktown Strutters, a motorcycle gang that doesn't have a lot to do with the rest of the story. She's searching for her missing mother, whose disappearance may be connected with the recent kidnapings of prominent figures in the black community. Parks' investigation is the perfect excuse to lead us from one eccentric character to another (my favorites would be three street juvies who speak in the round-robin style of Donald Duck's nephews). She is sometimes assisted and accompanied by an ineffectual all-male gang that wouldn't even get admittance into the Cosby Kids (unless you can imagine someone named 'V.D.' knocking around with Mushmouth and Weird Harold). Parks follows leads until it appears there is nowhere else for the film to go, at which point the story goes into the can and the last act becomes a showdown against an arch-villain in a papier-mâché cave.

If *Darktown Strutters* isn't going to get cult status for George Armitage's script then it at least tries to cover all the other bases; it has Playskool set decoration by Jack Fisk (everything is painted in primary and secondary colors), wild costumes, and sudden musical interludes where the characters take time off the story to 'Get Down and Boogie' (the film's alternate re-release title). There's also enough signage wordplay to outdo an episode of *The Simpsons*. It has nearly everything it needs for status as a cult classic except a star turn in the lead role – Parks was known beforehand only as one half of the 'Bambi and Thumper' duo that gave Sean Connery a hard time in *Diamonds are Forever*, and never followed a movie career afterwards. Perversely, the best known face in this Blaxploitation movie is that of a white B-movie regular, Dick Miller. *Darktown Strutters* is so relentlessly frothy and cartoonish that we can't take offense at its non-PC gags, offhand parodies or over-the-top characters. It's a riot. However one has to wonder if the film's ridicule of white characters would have been a tougher sell to studios if the film-makers had all been black.

DEAD MEN DON'T WEAR PLAID (1982) 89m.

It helps if you're both a Steve Martin fan and an old Hollywood movie buff to get the most out of this fastidiously engineered conceit. Martin, who co-wrote with George Gipe and director Carl Reiner, plays a private eye who is approached by slinky Rachel Ward (who brings her own performance to what might have otherwise just been a mock bombshell role) to find her missing father. The first-person narration, black and white photography, art deco titles, and opening score by Miklos Rosza establish within moments that this is going to be spoof on Raymond Chandler crime thrillers, but if you were to enter this film without knowing its central joke, then you'd no doubt be surprised to suddenly see Alan Ladd walking down a corridor while Martin rummages through a nearby office. What *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* sets out to do – and it makes me dizzy to think how many viewing hours must have been spent in order to knit this story together – is to seamlessly insert clips from classic Hollywood pictures into Martin's investigation. Among his many encounters he has telephone conversations with Bogart, shares a train compartment with Cary Grant, and makes a date with Ingrid Bergman. All in all, 18 different films and 18 different Hollywood players (some of them interweaving in and out of the same films) are edited effectively into the story. It's the visual equivalent of David Thomson's one-of-a-kind novel 'Suspects' – fortunately all the stars and their films are listed in the final credits so you don't have to drive yourself crazy trying to figure them out afterwards. The mixture of material makes it hard to determine what era *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* is supposed to be set in – Martin's reference to the Kinsey Report would place it somewhere in the 50s, which seems a bit out of place considering that all but one of the contributing films were made in the 40s.

I admire the effort that's been made with the

matching. Not only the photography, but the sets, props and costumes (by no less than Edith Head!) are also tailored in service of the original footage. For the most part, the clips have also been well selected. The more familiar moments (e.g. Burt Lancaster getting plugged in *The Killers*, James Cagney performing a casual execution in *White Heat*) don't work nearly as well – in fact it's annoying to see the Cagney scene, which was effectively chilling in the original, lifted out of context. Contrast this to Veronica Lake's bit, which is funny even though she says only two words. *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* was never meant to be a laugh riot – it's more an affectionate pastiche, if anything else – but some of Martin's hardboiled dialogue is hysterical. There's a few in-jokes (the 'You know how to whistle' line from *To Have or Have Not*; a reference to Charles Laughton's star turn as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) but the fun comes mainly from watching Martin delivering offbeat lines to Hollywood stars who are playing their scenes straight. It should be noted that unlike many other comedies that integrate found footage, the tone of Reiner's film is never campy or patronizing to its older source material. Finally, and most importantly, *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* has one rare distinction: it includes the only scene with an actor in drag that I've actually ever found funny. Poor Fred MacMurray just didn't know what hit him.

DEATH TAKES A HOLIDAY (1934) 79m.

It doesn't seem possible in the 21st century to recapture the charm of this filmed adaptation of Alberto Casella's play 'La Morte in Vacanze' because the people we see onscreen are the genuine article – i.e. inhabitants of the 1930s – which makes the theatricality of the production easier to accept. Not exactly a comedy or drama, and with a supernatural premise, *Death Takes a Holiday* doesn't need much more than its title to sum up the story: the Grim Reaper leaves his domain to spend a few days in a villa on Earth in order to gain some understanding of the living. But while Death is investigating life, the story's heroine (Evelyn Venable) contends that there is "something more to life", which turns out to be…death.

The traditional image of Death as a cowled, skeletal figure bearing a scythe was well established in cinema from the silent days (he got a makeover – and a chessboard –that became popularised in the public consciousness after Bergman's *Seventh Seal* which has since been hard to shake) but in *Holiday* he is presented more as a 'Constant Companion' – represented at first as a shadow that cannot be shaken off, and embodied later as a house guest that can't be gotten rid of. Introducing himself to the company at the villa as Sirki, a prince from an unidentified country, it's clear that Death is the ultimate 'foreigner abroad'. His naiveté in such simple matters as wine are handily explained with the excuse that he is unfamiliar with Western niceties, and his odd proclamations (which are amusing to the audience in the know) are dismissed as exotic eccentricities.

As Death/Sirki, Frederic March is required to walk a fine line – he has an appreciation of irony even if he doesn't quite understand humor and maintains a befuddled aloofness that seems appropriate, but loses his grasp at the end when he displays the distinctly human qualities of self-sacrifice and empathy. It was a smart choice to have March play the part as a foreigner, which constantly reminds us that he is separated from the others (the mere mortals) in the cast; also, some of his fruitier lines don't seem as silly as they would if he'd been playing the part as a native English speaker. It's also right to place Death among the idle rich – how different this story would have been if he had surrounded himself with blue-collar workers – who don't have a care in the world and seem ripe for the plucking (the opening scene, with cars racing along precipitous mountain roads, has many possible outcomes). By keeping the story in a lavish villa with society types, director Mitchell Leisen is able to move March around a setting of evening dress, medals and carefully-laid tables as if death was just another formality; has him to waltz to the wistful strains of Sibelius' 'Valse Triste'; gives him the opportunity to share philosophies about the nature of life and death with the elder guests; and puts him in the place most likely to meet Venable, a child of literature whose romantic notions give her a mysticism not normally found in movie heroines of the period. Fantasy was generally treated in a

whimsical, fluffy manner in 30s cinema (especially anything involving ghosts or the devil), so *Holiday*'s final scene must have caused some discussion among moviegoers in 1934 as they exited the theater. The story was remade, in concept only, as *Meet Joe Black* in 1998, in which Brad Pitt pulled off the difficult feat of playing Death not as a foreigner, but as an Average Joe.

THE DEVIL AT YOUR HEELS (1981) 102m.

You might think this documentary is a put-on after the first ten minutes – the kind of thing stunt-comedian 'Super Dave' Osborne might come up with – but it's further endorsement that truth is stranger (and funnier) than fiction. Star of the show is 'Mad Canadian' daredevil Ken Carter, whose speciality is jumping cars. His dream is to go one better than Evel Knievel's famous leap over the Snake River Canyon and build a ramp and car that will enable him to jump the St Lawrence seaway from the USA into Canada. He should have just used the Ambassador Bridge. The events that we watch unfold become a comedy of errors on a scale so monumental it practically lobbies for a renaming of Murphy's Law in honor of Carter.

The pitfalls Carter experiences are best left undisclosed here, but his quest is a captivating story. A great cast of 'supporting characters' drift in and out of the film, all promoters or stunt performers (including Knievel himself) with their own opinions of Carter and his harebrained stunt. Taking central place among them is Carter himself, congenial all the while (compare him with fellow stuntman Ken Powers near the film's end) and maintaining an optimistic perspective while he suffers one setback after another. Carter remains equanimous throughout the entire project, proving that he is either a nice guy or just plain nuts (he's probably too fixated to get genuinely angry). Born to hustle, he shares with his adrenaline-hooked buddies an unfortunate tendency to deliver one clumsy aphorism or mixed metaphor after another – even his last words are a misattribution of a Crosby, Stills and Nash song – but at least this proves that Carter is the kind of everyman that we could easily root for.

The preparations for the costly stunt stretch out to months, then years. Like Carter, we too never know what is around the corner, and become just as frustrated as the players in the film who keep waiting for something to happen. Film-maker Robert Fortier wrings every last drop of expectation out of us, serving up one false alarm after another (the use of music is very effective) until the tension in the film's final reels is unbearable. Guaranteed to produce laughs and gasps from the audience, there's no reason why this obscure gem shouldn't become a regular on the festival circuit. Don't even try to guess the real-life twist ending!

D.O.A. (1988) 96m. This remake of the identically-titled 1950 thriller is snappily directed, features popular lead actors (Dennis Quaid, Meg Ryan), and has a great premise, but is ultimately torpedoed by a misconceived script. Quaid is an English professor (and has-been writer) on a Texas campus who finds out that he has been fatally poisoned. With only 24 hours left to live he tries to find out who is responsible. While I thoroughly enjoyed this on first viewing, it doesn't hold up so well the second time around. The story, which belongs to the 'what would you do if the world was going to end in ten minutes' school of speculation, treads the path a number of us would no doubt choose – we want answers as badly as Quaid does. What drives *DOA* is the notion that fear of death can be taken to a further stage – the fear of dying without meaning or reason. In fact Quaid is more preoccupied with solving the mystery behind his imminent death than the physical act of dying itself.

The most puzzling thing for Quaid (and the audience) is the crime's motive. There is no apparent reason why anyone should want to kill him. This intriguing element is one of the best things the film has going for it until the denouement, which is so absurd it undermines the story's foundation. Worse, it trivializes Quaid's death. There are other glitches, most obviously that by the time the bodies start piling up (and there's way too many for such a weak motive) there are not a lot of suspects left over to pick the murderer from. There's also a convoluted exposition scene with Charlotte Rampling that for all purposes is irrelevant to the main story. Nor am I convinced about the necessity for Meg Ryan's character. Her brief interlude with Quaid supposedly

reminds him of the quality of life that he has let slip by – but does anybody really need this just before they're about to die? On a purely filmic level, the film succeeds, and there are enough inventive moments to make it interesting. A promising cinema debut for Annabel Jankel and Rocky Morton – with all its plot holes it might have been a good idea for them to push style over content even further.

DON QUIXOTE (1957-1992) 116m. The case most often is that name directors start small and work their way into the system until they can hit the big time. The tragedy of Orson Welles was that he started at the top and slid down to the bottom, leaving a wake of tantalizing projects in various stages of incompletion. In some cases he ran out of money, got stuck in legal falderal, or was just plain unlucky. One of the few what-ifs that managed to escape oblivion was his pet project *Don Quixote*, shot in Spain with his own money, on and off, for more than a decade. The available footage was left in disarray until an attempt at a restoration was presented in 1992 by Jess Franco (yes, that Jess Franco), who had previously assisted Welles on *Chimes at Midnight* but is better known for such horror and sexploitation opuses as *Lesbian Vampires* (yes, that *Lesbian Vampires*). The resulting 116-minute film was slammed by nearly everybody, firstly because of Franco's association with the project (Welles fans and film historians obviously felt that the Master deserved better than to be tainted thus) and secondly because the previously restored version of Welles' *Othello* had led them to hope for equally polished work on future restorations of his catalogue.

The quality of the *Don Quixote* print varies widely, and Welle's narration bubbles up now and then amid some pretty blatant dubbing, but I'm surprised that Franco and his colleagues managed to assemble as much as they did, given Welles' careless housekeeping with his film stock and the film's absence of an audio track. I was expecting 'cheat' shots of reversed footage and several narrative fills over the top of still photographs (as was done with more reputable re-creations such as *Greed* and *Lost Horizon*), but in spite of some missing scenes *Quixote* appears coherent and conclusive. Unintentionally, the patchiness of the film complements the capriciousness of Cervantes' novel; similarly the erratic image quality gives the film an archival feel, as if these really were pictures of Don Quixote captured trotting about 17th century Spain. The first hour of the story is visually repetitive (Sancho Panza dogging the errant knight's footsteps across the countryside) and, apart from a moment when Quixote runs into a woman on a Vespa, doesn't contain anything that might mark it as particularly Wellesian. It gets interesting halfway through (ironically at the point that Sancho has to carry the movie alone) when the story starts playing about with the timelessness of Quixote's character. The point seems to be that certain figures in our consciousness become so iconographic that they transcend their own fictionality and enter dialogues with reality. Akim Tamiroff is well cast as Sancho, but Francisco Reiguera is Quixote to a tee, as if he had stepped directly from the pages of the book. That's quite an achievement considering that all the dialogue was dubbed in decades later by different actors. Understandably, *Quixote* is the least of Welles' features, but just as intriguing as his major works and not without the mischief and warmth this story deserves. If there's a curse on Cervantes' hero then it has so far toppled two visionary film-makers – Terry Gilliam's struggle with the subject is even more unfortunate than Welles'. In the same way that it is considered unlucky to refer to 'the Scottish Play' by name, so too may film-makers caution themselves to refer to future adaptations of this material as 'the Spanish Novel'.

THE DONNER PARTY (1992) 84m. This absorbing documentary by Ric Burns follows the format of his successful television series *The Civil War* and tells its story through the use of old letters, diaries, sepia-tone photographs, maps, paintings, and commentaries by writers/historians. It's to Burns' credit that he can sustain this approach for nearly an hour and a half – but then his subject matter is entirely engrossing. The film traces the progress west of the 1846 wagon train that became known as the Donner Party, which, after a terrible journey, found itself snowed in at the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

While it is the trek's gruesome outcome that people are mostly familiar with, the Party's many hardships and dramas en route to California are equally gripping. There is enough material here to fill a movie script of epic proportions. Curiously, the static appearance of the film's frames (the only motion Burns allows is from the elements – water, fire, clouds, and snow) may cause you to visualize your own 'action' and 'actors' and 'dialogue' as it goes on. This distant, yet respectful, approach has an authority which enables us to react to the emotional core of the story without feeling as manipulated as we might by a sensationalized Hollywood script (I know I shouldn't laugh in a couple of places, but there are a couple of narrated footnotes that are either too ironic or bizarre to resist). As in his earlier work, Burns employs actors to provide voice-overs for the various true-life emigrants (Amy Madigan, Timothy Hutton, and Eli Wallach among them). It's one of a number of 'medley' devices he weaves together to keep our attention from flagging, which also include his pan-scans of photographs (many of which are shown repeatedly) and frequent background music (ranging from languid Spanish guitars to brooding themes from *Twin Peaks'* composer Angelo Badalamenti). Keep an eye out for it.

DUEL (1971) 90m. This is not technically Steven Spielberg's film debut, as it began life as a TV-Movie, but it was expanded for theatrical release outside the US after Universal saw its box-office potential. Man-vs-truck story brings together the powerhouse talents of young director Spielberg and fantasy writer Richard Matheson (they'd reunite for the *Twilight Zone* movie and *Amazing Stories* series). When David Mann (Dennis Weaver) passes a truck on a desert road the truck driver retaliates by passing him in turn. From there begins a murderous fight for ownership of the road. Weaver becomes an unwilling David to the truck's Goliath. The most fascinating element of this film is that we don't really question the unseen truck driver's motivation. This is because Matheson's sharp but simple story works almost entirely on the primal levels of territorial dominance and the battle for survival. Despite millennia of evolution the human brain still retains the instinct of the hunt. Mann is quite obviously Man, and his blood-red car is as nondescript and generic a vehicle as you would find. The truck, on the other hand, is an amalgam of different archetypal beasts – it is a smoke-belching dragon (which appears to be waiting in its cave at one point when it turns its headlights on), a lumbering mammoth (witness its animal bellow at the film's conclusion), and, it has been suggested, a precursor to the shark in *Jaws* (we see menacing POV shots as it glides towards its prey).
This is the production that really got studio heads taking notice of Spielberg, and it's fun watching him at work. As it was planned shot by shot it makes an ideal piece for perusal by film students. Extra footage for the cinema version includes scenes with a bus and a railway crossing (although in retrospect I find these don't work as well as the more basic cat-and-mouse bullying on the open road). Weaver, best known for his cowboy detective McCloud, is an unusual but effective choice for the role of the bewildered, victimized motorist. Title notwithstanding, *Duel* is not too far removed from a Western anyway – there is a desert setting, a bar fight, a cowboy-booted villain (the only glimpse we really get of him), a collection of licence plates on the truck's grille (in the manner of notches on a gun holster), a basic good-vs-evil challenge to the death. Instead of guns, the protagonists use the next most significant instrument of murder in civilized culture – their vehicles. It may get you thinking about the highways the way *Jaws* got you thinking about the beach.

EIGHT MEN OUT (1988) 112m. John Sayles' film about the 1919 Chicago White Sox scandal (in which eight players took bribes to throw the World Series) appeared in the middle of a 'baseball movie' revival at the end of the eighties. The reason why it was not as popular as many of the others is simple: it does not portray ball players as larger-than-life heroes. But it's easily one of the better pictures. As would be expected from any Sayles production, the

ensemble acting is terrific (no one 'star' outshines the others) and no peripheral character is wasted. The sense of period is also well evoked, aided in part by the film's leached photography.

The White Sox players are pulled into the fix early on in the story, leaving us to watch the Series, game by game, for the first half of the film. It's not like the usual baseball pictures, where we're rooting for the team to win, and uplifted by some final spectacular catch or home run. What makes the games compelling are the two opposing factions involved – there is always tension, regardless of whether the team is winning or losing. In *Eight Men Out* the playing field is more like a minefield. Half of the team doesn't know what the other half (who are on the take) are doing. The half that is on the take are further divided – the younger players (John Cusack and Charlie Sheen) don't want to look bad, but know that they must 'fail' convincingly. The coach and backstop are by turns bewildered and enraged. The secret play signals become subterfuge. The fans are confused. The newspaper reporters (one of whom is Sayles, who at one point sings a sardonic version of 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles') are suspicious. Behind this intrigue lie the gamblers, who have made their own arrangements around the fix. It's an interesting touch that they have all at one time been sportsmen themselves: the idea of playing a game on the level is for rookies. The second half of the film, which is even more complicated, deals with the exposure and subsequent indictment of the players.

Eight Men Out is a fascinating picture because – like Robert Redford's *Quiz Show* – it deals with an event in history that undermined public faith and demonstrated that organized crime was able to corrupt what was regarded to be a wholesome, all-American institution. Notice that while the public cries shame, they object to the scandal mainly on principal, and that it's the youngsters and the ball players themselves that it hits at gut level. You won't exactly feel sorry for the team (Sayles is too smart to be that manipulative), but you will recognize the loss of a more innocent time. The great final scene anticipates Kevin Costner's hit of the following year *Field of Dreams*, which fulfilled many a fan's wishes and gave the eight 'Black Sox' a second chance.

EVENT HORIZON (1997) 95m. It's not that *Event Horizon* isn't well made. It's just that I've been there before. In fact, I'm hard pressed to think of another film more entirely fabricated of quotes from other movies. Barely five minutes into the story you may find myself sidetracked with references from obvious candidates like *Alien*, *Lifeforce*, and *2010*, followed by non-SF films such as *Don't Look Now* and *The Shining*, and culminating with *Solaris* and, God help us, Disney's *The Black Hole*.

Why is it – pardon the pun – that black hole movies always suck? It's a fascinating science-fact phenomenon that still hasn't been treated right by Hollywood. In this case, the Event Horizon is not the rim of a black hole, but the name of a spaceship that reappears in Neptune's orbit after a seven year absence. But maybe it's really a non-event Horizon. It's a *Marie Celeste* in Space scenario, the kind of story that early *Star Trek* episodes bought the patent on years ago. To be fair, the opening scenes are writ large upon the screen, at least proving once again that SF cinema was the reason that Panavision was invented. The actors – Laurence Fishburne and Sam Neill head the cast – are all fine, the sets are great, the budget is big, there is some legitimate haunted-house atmosphere, a couple of gripping sequences, and at least one moment that made me laugh the first time I saw it (when Fishburne decisively announces they're vacating the ship). But there are still holes in the plot, and I don't mean the black kind either, that keep the film from being solidly grounded: the abandonment of all scientific rationale (even Neill's pragmatic Doctor gives up) shows that the film-makers were less interested in explanation than effect.

It may not be the movie's fault. The problem comes with a viewing expectation of something more purely science-fictional, and instead getting that SF-horror hybrid that seems to have consumed the genre of late. I like the idea of a spaceship voyaging to hell and back, and if I had seen *Event Horizon* fifteen years before its time I would have no doubt loved it. But you can only jump out of your seats from the same shock effects so often, and after that there's not a lot left for a story to go on. Which is a shame, because it's the kind of film I'd like to enjoy more than I

actually do. Contrary to the implication of its title, *Event Horizon* doesn't take me into unchartered territory. The most unexpected thing about the film's ending is hearing a song by the Prodigy played over the final credits.

EVIL ROY SLADE (1972) 97m. Remembered with affection by many people who first saw it as a TV Movie, this Comedy-Western now seems like a warmup to *Blazing Saddles* which followed two years later. It still holds up because its silly humor is a breath of fresh air among contemporary comedies. The jokes are non-stop from beginning to end, which is ample reason to watch any comedy, but it's John Astin's performance as the title character that has secured *Evil Roy Slade* a place in many viewers' hearts. Moustachioed, clad entirely in black, and using his eyes to convey awkward confusion or manic glee, Astin is hilarious from the first moment we see him broadcasting an infectious guffaw while firing off rounds from his gun (it's the most good-natured evil laugh you've ever heard). He also manages the uncommon feat of remaining the same – i.e. two-dimensional – throughout the entire story. Characters as cartoonish as this do not require 'arcs' (in fact I would argue that few characters in any comedy require arcs, as evidenced by the success of the sitcom *Seinfeld*, which advocated the credo "No hugs, no learning"). Slade is refreshingly uncomplicated and doesn't progress much from a mean, greedy, devil-may-care bully with a chip on his shoulder (he was orphaned as a baby and had only buzzards for friends): his only purpose in the story is to provide a dependably transparent character whose behavior is predictable in every new setup he's thrown into.

The story is split into three acts – or three half-hour shows, since the idea for this character was originally conceived to feature him in a series – which first sees Slade robbing banks owned by a railway magnate (Mickey Rooney), secondly finds him being reformed and civilized by a local girl (Pamela Austin, who, like Astin, had already appeared in a number of Western TV shows), and thirdly returns Slade to the wild. It's a standard formula: establish a character who is an outsider and then get laughs by bringing them into the normal world to show them up as a fish out of water. Every scene is a setup for gags – Slade's dialogue is mostly agitated responses to lines that other characters feed him – which as written on the page aren't nearly as amusing as seeing Astin's delivery of them. To prevent the third act from merely repeating the first, the baton of lunacy is passed to equally cartoonish, two-dimensional Marshal Bing Bell, as played by Dick Shawn. Shawn, who was arguably the funniest thing in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* and *The Producers*, is relatively restrained here but, along with Dom DeLuise, comes the closest in the cast to matching Astin for laughs (coincidentally, Rooney, who had also starred in *Mad World*, played a character named Ding Bell). The only sad note about *Slade* is that newer audiences unfamiliar with Astin (or the television era of his heyday) may find it unsophisticated and childish. You don't have to be ten years old to enjoy it in the 21st Century…but it would probably help.

EXISTENZ (1998) 97m. This biotechnical carny show by David Cronenberg aims its sights squarely at Internet addicts and video-game junkies. While the idea of people so dissociated from reality that they spend all their 'quality time' within an artificial environment has rapidly become overworked in movies, Cronenberg still manages to come up with something that looks new. Jennifer Jason Leigh plays a designer of ultra-sophisticated virtual reality games (virtual actuality?), worshiped by players everywhere as if she were Lana Croft incarnate. But you can't be this good at something and not expect to draw attention, so Leigh finds herself fleeing industrial assassins and 'reality activists' intent on sabotaging her latest multi-million dollar project. She and fellow fugitive Jude Law hardwire themselves into the alternate universe of this game – 'eXistenZ' – as part of a routine diagnostic. Soon they find more than they bargained for: they discover another new and sophisticated game within eXistenZ which, as players, they must once again plug themselves into, and….you get the picture. By this time, walls of reality have truly dissolved.

The opening of *eXistenZ* indicates a computer-game version of Cronenberg's *Videodrome* – as a director he is well-known for his provocative recurring

themes (mutation, the bonding of flesh and technology, surgery, hospitals, bodies in revolt) and it initially appears that we're about to get a more considered reworking of his earlier films. It's the same, but different: firstly, the cyberspace setting is new territory for Cronenberg, but secondly (and more noticeably) his approach is considerably lighter. *eXistenZ* is the most good-humored thing he has ever put on screen – I would have never expected to see an audience having such an openly good time with a one of his films until now! Of course, the humor of *eXistenZ* is pretty skewed – those familiar with the director's work will realize that they're laughing at the same gooey, organic gross-outs that he used to unsettle everyone with in his other movies. One man buys a copy of a you-be-the-victim car accident game and we're instantly reminded of the director's previous film *Crash*, and the furore about the violent automobile games released in its wake. Even the cry "Death to enemies of reality" seems to be a lampoon of previous rantings about 'the new flesh'. And if the line "Trust no one!", delivered in all seriousness, isn't a poke at the *X-Files*, I don't know what is. Leigh and Law also try to loosen up and enjoy the game, even though Law figures there is something sick and wrong about it all (for this is Cronenberg country, after all, and cyberspace is not a spotless, computer-generated playing platform but a decayed, visceral fug).

And then of course there's all that sex, even though the characters never actually get down to having any. *eXistenZ* oozes sex continuously, with one hilarious metaphor after another thrown up on screen with abandon. Given Cronenberg's past history of equating sex with disease and death, this film must surely be seen as a kind of personal liberation.

THE EYE CREATURES (1965) 80m. Some movies are bad because of their writing, their acting, or their directing, but nothing is spared in this insipid horror flick from the 60s. Armed with a script that could have been written by your average twelve-year old, our clean-cut young heroes Stan and Susan find themselves spending most of their elopement trying to convince adults that the local necking spot in the woods is being invaded by saucermen. Will they listen? Of course not.

It's hard to tell which is the single worst feature of this movie, but the writing must surely be a likely contender for the top spot. Every phone conversation is ridiculous, and when the dialogue isn't expository it's just plain dumb. How about that line when Susan's pop, who happens to be the city attorney, snaps at her hit-and-run suspect boyfriend "You're lucky in one respect! The man you killed was a nobody!" To take the heat off the script, the acting is pretty rank, too (in some cases the cast is required to pretend they're driving stationary cars and act at the same time). At least Cynthia Hull (Susan) has the foresight to distract audiences from her performance with her vaguely ethnic, gravity-defying hairdo. The most unforgivable failing point of the movie, however, is the monster attack itself. Attack? What attack? I've never seen an alien strike force so ineffective and vulnerable (one hopeless specimen walks off a cliff at one point, for no apparent reason). The eye creatures, conveniently human-sized humanoids with bubbly heads, manage to do away with at least one unfortunate bystander, even if it is only by chasing him very, very slowly and pawing at the air in front of his face, but after that the 'attack' is all but over. In any case, the monsters have got to be less of a public menace than the neighborhood crank who keeps stomping about the woods with his shotgun in search of trespassing teens.

At first, the film appears to be indulging its young target audience by portraying all adults and authority figures (parents, the military, the police) as skeptical, patronizing, or incompetent. It's a little perverse when you consider the film was made by adults, which is why it could be reappraised. Sure, these teens save the day, but in the end they're just as ineffectual and witless as the adults they complain about. In the final scene Stan and Susan have forgotten about their marriage (their first step into adulthood, maybe) and admit they're just a couple of self-professed 'crazy kids' canoodling along with the rest of the gang in their cars. But what director Larry Buchanan (of *Mars Needs Women* fame) is most famous for in this flick is his daring juxtaposition of daylight scenes with night-time ones. No, not really. The production's day-for-night technique was just as inept as the rest of the picture.

EYES WIDE SHUT (1999) 159m. Stanley Kubrick's films have always confounded expectations, which is why inevitably they become reappraised and treated more generously. *2001* was not the cowboys-in-space jingoism that sci-fi films of the time were built on; *Barry Lyndon* was more like a walk through an art gallery than a lusty historical romance; *Full Metal Jacket* avoided the path of all other Vietnam films and spent one half of its time at boot camp and the other half in burned-out rubble. Likewise, audiences who looked for gossip on the Internet and read tabloids about his final film *Eyes Wide Shut* before its release ended up with their own fixed vision of what it was 'supposed' to be and no doubt felt gypped that there were no hot-and-heavy sex scenes between stars (and real-life married couple) Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, nor any full frontal nudity on their behalf either. But you have to wonder how prankish Kubrick himself was in this regard – the film's theatrical teaser, in which Cruise wordlessly fondles Kidman before a mirror, undoubtedly planted preconceptions in every viewer's mind. In fact Cruise and Kidman spend only a handful of scenes together: the storyline is concerned mainly with Cruise's own journey of discovery. His character alone appears to be responsible for the film's title, Kubrick's metaphor for those who walk through an uncertain world with eyes wide open but seeing nothing, or at least nothing they can comprehend. Cruise meets a variety of characters who are not what they seem: they wear masks, costumes, or wigs; they have foreign accents or ambivalent sexuality; they appear by chance and then are unavailable when he seeks them; even the city he lives in has a hybrid idenitity – for the first half of the film we could easily believe it was in Europe. He has elliptical conversations with his wife and doesn't know when his friend (Sydney Pollack) is telling the truth. Everyone in this film wears a mask, even when they're not wearing masks: Cruise's trademark grin is different this time, a nervous reaction that seems to be covering frustration or cold panic. Cruise starts investigating, and Kubrick's Steadicam sinuously keeps pace with him. Throughout the film he is primarily an observer – he encounters many women in various states of undress but is permitted only to look and not touch (two models at a party, a prostitute and her roommate, a drug overdose, a corpse, a debauchery). This frustration is obviously piling up on him – the first hour of the film is shot in warm and seductive flesh tones – and even when he takes action he remains an observer rather than a participant. But, like Cruise, we will never know what the 'truth' behind this tale really is, and no doubt film buffs will be picking over clues for some time to come. It's worth bearing in mind, however, that Kubrick would not have wanted any one truth to emerge in the first place.

It's perverse that Kubrick should spend two years shooting a film that takes place over two days, but Cruise and Kidman have never appeared so intense. Cruise, carrying the weight of the film, does well in the preferred Kubrick style: the deliberately paced dialogue (each character takes their turn to speak), the way exposition is dragged out by characters who are nervous or awkward, the way one person's dialogue is repeated as a question by another. All of this makes *Eyes Wide Shut* unique among other 'erotic thrillers' that turn out their pop offerings on similar subjects. It is by turns playful, sensuous, menacing, funny, otherworldly, and elegant. It is a film that will get under your skin. It's mesmerizing just to watch these people acting (the well-publicized constant retakes eventually shape the mannered performances customary in Kubrick's productions), including scene-stealing supporting roles such as rental shop owner and a hotel desk clerk. The fact that the married couple of the film are played by a real married couple also helps give the film a little extra edge – that, and the knowledge that this was the master film-maker's final opus.

It's appropriate that Kubrick should go out with a deliberation on obsession. It's fitting too that the final credit crawl should be accompanied by a waltz, given that his most indelible cinematic image has been that of spacecraft gliding to the strains of Strauss. And despite the tentative plans for at least one further film, Kubrick probably knew all along that this was going to be his swan song. He died only days after screening his approved final cut. The abrupt, final line of the film can be read as Kubrick's last joke: he literally went out with a bang.

F FOR FAKE (1973) 88m. This playful documentary by Orson Welles may make your head spin, especially the chop-and-switch of the first ten minutes. It's a thoroughly hermeneutic work that is quintessentially Welles even more than any of his fictional features, showing us Welles the actor, Welles the raconteur, Welles the parlor-magician, and Welles the film-maker, who blends his subject (art forgery) into the business of film fakery with a devilish sleight of hand.

Fake's hall-of-mirrors approach has danger of becoming irritating after a while, but Welles guides us through its strange events with confidence. Most of it is concerned with art forger Elmyr de Hory, who quietly circulated fake 'unknown' works of artists from his home in Ibeza. Once uncovered he became the subject of attention by writer Clifford Irving... who then upstaged him by himself becoming the perpetrator of a hoax upon producing a fake biography of Howard Hughes. Hughes gives a telephone interview stating that he's never heard of Irving – but there is no guarantee that it is really Hughes giving the interview. Meanwhile, Hory suspects that Irving has stashed some of his forged paintings for future sales; others think that the handwritten Hughes documents were forged for Irving by Hory; there is even speculation that Hory isn't a real fake, but a fake fake, and that the so-called 'forged' artworks are real paintings. Get the idea? Welles revels in the duplicity of his subject, reminding us time and time again that we can't trust the medium of film either (remember, this is the individual who pulled off the biggest media hoax in history with his famous 'War of the Worlds' broadcast).

The film takes a break from the machinations of its tricky story after an hour while Welles talks of the events that led him to Hollywood to make *Citizen Kane* (which at first was going to be based not on Randolph William Hearst but...Howard Hughes!), then spends the last twenty minutes of the film recounting an anecdote about Picasso. At first it seems that this has been included into the documentary because the Hory/Irving/Hughes material couldn't be stretched any further – but keep watching: Welles isn't through with that idea yet. It's a delight seeing him playing to the camera, sitting at a restaurant with friends, laughing while interviewing a gallery owner, studying footage through a moviola, and entertaining a youngster with conjuring tricks. As Welles preferred not to discuss his films in interviews it's the closest peek into his mind we're likely to get.

THE FALLS (1980) 185m. Another counting game by idiosyncratic director Peter Greenaway. In many ways it is the ultimate Greenaway film. This audacious feature has no story and seems like a put-on when you try to describe it to others. A strange occurrence, known in the film as the Violent Unknown Event (VUE), strikes the planet one night and leaves 19 million victims in its wake. The effects are mixed, sometimes benevolent, sometimes not, sometimes a little of both, but common symptoms can be identified. Most pointedly, the victims become obsessed with birds and flight. Several also begin talking in unidentifiable languages. Greenaway elects to tell his story by excerpting 92 biographies from a filmed catalogue of VUE victims, each name starting with the letters FALL. For the first twenty minutes this doesn't look like easy viewing – by the fifteenth biography (they vary in running times) we realize there are still another 77 to go – but eventually we become familiar with the material and its recurring themes, and Greenaway's mammoth project becomes intriguing.

Anyone acquainted with other Greenaway films will know that his work is very much an acquired taste, which is why *The Falls* is not recommended to neophytes (but if you're feeling brave, go ahead and take the plunge). Much of the fun comes from recognizing quotes from his previous short subjects and future features – there are the women called Cissie Colpitts (who would resurface – pun intended – in *Drowning by Numbers*); one subject's obsession with the letter H (*H is for House*); the dreams of water (*Water*); the characters who are watching

another Greenaway film (*Vertical Features Remake*); the blend of artwork and birds (*A Walk Through H*). *The Falls* also quotes from itself: there are 92 biographies, 92 trains, 92 VUE languages; characters do indeed 'fall' (from buildings, from homemade wings in the style of Icarus) and literally become 'falls' (one woman turns into a human waterfall, a man changes his name to Niagara). Greenaway's punning and deadpan humour reinforce the futility of his project. Much of the information compiled for the biographies is trivial and not particularly useful (e.g. one man's body heat is identical to the average temperature of sedentary passerines). The randomness of the VUE symptoms add to its arbitrariness. Nobody can agree on theories (the epicenter of the VUE) or even facts (the date in history when one man jumped from the Eiffel Tower). It appears that to Greenaway any collection of statistics is just as fanciful as a fiction, which may explain his project's concept. *The Falls* presents facts and figures as ultimately fractal, where the very act of codifying creates a sort of unpredictable, baroque aesthetic. And who better than Greenaway, an artist and former statistician, to present this?

This may be Greenaway's least accessible feature, but it has a lot going for it – it is markedly unique and highly personal. Not merely an elaborate experimental film, it reminds us of the territories that cinema can create and then travel in. But it's probably enough that *The Falls* runs for three hours – Greenaway has stated that he would like to make an even longer version for television. Given his interest in computer/video technology, it's likely that the ultimate fate of *The Falls* is to exist as an actual directory on CD-ROM. That's taking cinematic boundaries about as far as they can go.

FARGO (1996) 98m. I'd been getting worried about the Coen brothers shortly before their production of *Fargo*. I'd foregone their previous film *The Hudsucker Proxy*, after sensing they were settling themselves into a period-movie rut. *Fargo*, set in 1987, isn't exactly contemporary but did place the Coens back on track with a hit (Director Joel took the prize at Cannes). It revisits the smalltown-murder-gone-wrong of their debut *Blood Simple*, but less self-consciously. Frances McDormand (Joel's real-life partner) is a Minnesota cop investigating a triple shooting along an isolated, snowbound highway. Piecing together clues and statements she gradually unearths what we, the audience, have known all along: that the mayhem – and there is more to come – is all part of a kidnapping stunt gone horribly awry.

Given that North Dakota is the birthplace of Paul Bunyan, latecomers who miss the based-on-true-story disclaimer at the film's start may simply assume that the Coens have used the setting to spin a tall tale of their own. The landscape they film is as stark and featureless as if it were made of White-Out. The spectre of Bunyan presides over all in the form of a spookily lit totemic idol. And yes, to perpetuate the metaphor, an axe is swung by one of the villains – and if this suggests a violent side to *Fargo* then you can take it as having been warned in advance. The violence isn't of the punkish Rodriguez-Tarantino style that was then the current vogue, but is just as painful to watch.

It is to the Coens' credit that they pull off a difficult task with agility and style; their assured steps from darkness into light is a cinematic balancing act. Most of this is thanks to McDormand, who provides the film with a soul that we can now see conspicuously absent from other Coen films. Her chipper equanimity persuades us that maybe she is the only ray of sunshine able to penetrate the dark, cold world around her. Her performance, along with W H Macy, as an increasingly anxious car salesman, and Steve Buscemi as, well, Steve Buscemi, made *Fargo* the Coen's best-acted film to date. At the time it appeared that the storyline was so steeped with the Coen's usual trademarks that they had unearthed a true story that was a suitable reflection of their own fictions; some time later they admitted it was their own tall tale after all.

FAST COMPANY (1979) 91m. While *Fast Company* appears to be an unremarkable racing picture to the casual viewer, it's of some interest to film buffs because it is a most unusual entry in the oeuvre of horror director David Cronenberg. If you were unaware of his filmography, you'd probably think that this was his debut feature – it certainly has that New World Pictures look about it, as if

Cronenberg was part of the stable of up-and-coming film-makers recruited by Roger Corman during the 70s. Its B-movie elements are also supplemented by a soundtrack of original rock tunes (which sound like a mixture of Bob Seger and Bruce Springsteen) and co-starring roles from exploitation regulars John Saxon and Claudia Jennings.

The vehicles driven in *Fast Company* are drag cars – fuelers and funny cars – which are an unlikely subject for a film because their races are over as soon as they've begun, leaving little in the way of visuals. It's this blink-and-you'll-miss-it factor that influences the documentary look of the racetrack scenes. The cars look like hunched predators ready to strike, roaring, shuddering, and spitting fire as if they were machine-gunning each other. They run not on gas, but a mixture of nitro and alcohol, and their edgy jockeying for position gives us the feeling of an imminent explosion – which their sudden, furious bursts of speed become. Throughout, we're waiting for the crash that must be coming. Racetracks generally make good metaphors for the film characters that inhabit them, but there's no endless looping around a static circuit in *Fast Company*. The short bursts of speed – their preparation, buildup and release – would fasten themselves easily enough to repressed, inarticulate characters, but paradoxically the drivers in *Fast Company* are likeable and easy-going. As the protagonist Lonnie 'Lucky Man' Johnson, William Smith doesn't display any passion for racing. Instead he's simply resigned to spending his life on wheels, whether racing or in his lavish trailer (every time he has conversations with people they take place in or around vehicles). This is America, as evidenced by the constant red-white-blue coloring of the film, and car culture is the thing that it's built on. Cronenberg, who took on the project because of his interest in motor racing, doesn't attempt any of the body/machine collisions he is famous for in his work, but is settles for a more purely psychological approach: that in a motorized, mechanized age, those who make their livings around machines become consumed by them.

There's little to distinguish *Fast Company* from other speedway films, B-movie or otherwise, but it's still agreeable viewing and has a few interesting moments. Somewhat uncharacteristically, Jennings is the only female member of the cast to keep her clothes on. This would turn out to be her last film – ironically she would die behind the wheel in a car crash soon afterwards. Cronenberg, of course, would go on to direct *Crash* several years later, the seeds perhaps already having been sown by this earlier project. As it happened, *Fast Company* became a victim of legal problems and the film's cinema release lasted about as long as its drag races.

FAST TIMES AT RIDGEMONT HIGH (1982)

92m. In *Never Been Kissed*, Drew Barrymore played a writer posing as a student in high school to research a story. In real life, 22-year old Cameron Crowe (later a writer-director himself) spent a year 'undercover' in a San Diego high school doing the same thing. The resulting book and film, *Fast Times*, could easily have been written without recourse to such methods (maybe Cameron was just feeling nostalgic) but it's still one of the best of an undernourished genre. Besides Crowe, you also have director Amy Heckerling and the quality cast to thank, several of whom went on to establish durable screen careers (You don't usually find an ensemble like Sean Penn, Phoebe Cates, Jennifer Jason Leigh and Judge Rheinhold in most teen campus flicks).

Ostensibly a comedy, *Fast Times* grounds itself in reality and avoids the hi-jinks route that cripples many of its not-so-smart imitators. If it is the intention of Crowe's script to hold a mirror up to contemporary high school students and show us their lives, then the absence of a contrived storyline is a good decision. It's the lack of plot that makes this film repeatable viewing – if anything, *Fast Times* improves a second time around because its fluctuating tone doesn't subvert your expectations. The diverse characters wend their way through a collage of set pieces, retaining credibility without coming across as stereotypes. Even the film's most overt character, Sean Penn's spaced-out surfer dude Jeff Spicoli, seems naturally drawn (he pretty much established the archetype with this performance). His dialogues with the dogmatic History teacher Mr Hand (Ray Walston) are the film's most enjoyable moments, leaving Jennifer Jason Leigh's character to carry the burden of *Fast Times*' downbeat side. We watch Leigh go through one miserable

sexual/romantic encounter after another, but at least her advice from the more experienced Cates is juxtaposed with Brian Backer's coaching from Robert Romanus to some humorous effect (after being told to use Led Zeppelin for make-out music, Backer plays the ominous, booming Zep track 'Kashmir' on his car stereo). Surprisingly, the frequent discussions about sex are more blunt and crude when coming from the girls. That doesn't mean these scenes are used for cheap laughs: *Fast Times* works well because we have the sense that, like Crowe, we are listening in.

Fast Times seemed worthy of attention in the early 80s because it hit the screen at about the time it looked like there was going to be a new wave of female directors (i.e. Susan Seidelman, Penelope Spheeris, and Martha Coolidge). This didn't really happen, but the film seems to have made an impression on many viewers (although the main memory of anyone I've ever spoken to seems to be of Cates shedding her bikini top). Nowadays the film's popularity is assured by fans who saw the film in cinemas when they were in high school themselves and have since claimed it as their 80s photograph album. Even a moment as simple as Judge Rheinhold bopping to the radio while washing his car seems to be a perfectly-captured snapshot. The great soundtrack is a bonus – though curiously the music itself doesn't date the film as much as its references to the likes of Pat Benatar and Cheap Trick.

FASTER, PUSSYCAT! KILL! KILL! (1965) 83m. One of those rare things: A drive-in movie that is as good as its title. However, such is its fame that first-time viewers may be expecting more than it can deliver. The first time I saw it was at a double-bill with *Up!* which played to half a dozen people. My second viewing, a few years later, was at a film festival with a full house. What a difference an audience makes!

Russ Meyer's drive-in classic had considerable impact on many viewers back in '65 (among them cult director John Waters) but didn't get a stronger international presence until the early 80s, when cinema buffs who had seen B-Grade and Z-Grade films as youngsters began championing their favorite films in print. What Meyer did to make his film so memorable was to transfer the film-making sensibilities he had developed in his earlier exploitation films to the limitations of commercial cinema, reshaping the B-movie and introducing his independent streak to new audiences. As well as disregarding the conventions of studio pictures he also abandoned many of his own trademarks, among them flashbacks, flash-forwards, rapid intercutting, wraparound narration and fetishistic inserts of props. Perversely, the removal of nudity and sex – one of Meyer's most obvious selling points – gave the film-makers greater freedom, not less: without the distraction of obligatory flesh scenes Meyer and co-writer Jack Moran were able to keep the events on screen in service of the story.

In a gender reversal of Meyer's previous film *Motor Psycho*, *Pussycat* opens with three free-spirited go-go dancers speeding their sports cars along a desert road (this image seems to endorse the film's title from the outset) where they meet a young couple performing time trials on a makeshift racetrack. Varla, the leader of the trio (the role that established Tura Satana's place in cult history) provokes the boyfriend of petite, Gidget-like Susan Bernard into a fight which turns ugly. The gals flee the racetrack, taking Bernard with them, only to find themselves on the property of a misanthropic old man and his two sons. The rest of the film is a rondo of lechery, betrayals, bitching and plotting, as the volatile personalities of the assorted players all strive to outfox each other.

It's the women of *Pussycat* (Satana, Lori Williams and Meyer regular Haji) that provide the basis for its fan following – they are assertive, brash, sexually uninhibited and as tough as nails, and in a post-1966 climate of political correctness they celebrate all that is 'right' about being 'wrong'. Satana steals the show as the constantly vicious, karate-chopping Varla, but interestingly, the more vulnerable Bernard is equally as memorable. Dwarfed by the three Amazons that have abducted her, Bernard is convincing in a role that requires her to be constantly traumatized. She also provides the film with its time element: everything is contingent upon an escape from what has become her nightmare. Her attempts to run and reason her way out meet with failure each time, and only by confronting the story's 'monster' head on is she able to bring her ordeal to an end.

There's more to the central casting of *Pussycat* than the attributes of its leading ladies, however – Meyer knew that he would be able to get away with much more in the story if he made the 'car club' female. Consider the alternative response if it had been a male trio that had kidnapped the small, defenseless Bernard and put her through hell. In fact, it's all something of a con: apart from a couple of seduction scenes, the women's roles in *Pussycat* could be switched to men's with hardly any change of dialogue (in much the same way that Sigourney Weaver's role in *Alien* was originally written for a male lead). To enforce the strength of the women, Meyer emasculates the men in the film by making them witless, bookish and disabled; furthermore the women kill and maim in distinctly male/phallic ways (using knives and cars) and all but one of the murders in the film are committed by women. And then of course, there's that dialogue, made up almost entirely of double entendres and vicious putdowns – the dinner table scene is more shamelessly smutty than any other mealtime gathering you're likely to have seen. In spite of all this, *Pussycat* never come across as sleazy – at no point do you feel uncomfortably exposed to a low-rent exploitation flick. Instead *Pussycat* looks like a B-movie that somehow slipped sideways into cinemas through a crack that nobody had noticed at the time. That opening has since sealed itself shut, so we can count ourselves fortunate that films like this live on to be viewed today.

FEAR AND DESIRE (1953) 62m. The only reason this low-budget indie film is still being hunted down decades after its first appearance is because of its director, Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick had only directed a few short documentaries beforehand, but was ambitious enough to make a war movie for his feature debut. He should have switched to another genre. Ever the perfectionist, he later disowned the film, which he thought amateurish, and did his best to keep it out of circulation. For the next 60 years, the difficulty in even viewing *Fear and Desire*, let alone owning a copy, pretty much achieved his aim of making it a putative work, at least during his lifetime, leaving his second feature *Killer's Kiss* as the earliest and therefore 'first' Kubrick film that most film buffs see.

Fans of the director will have to play connect the dots if they want to showcase *Fear and Desire* as an archetypal Kubrick product. The fact is that if you didn't know he directed this film before you watched it, then you'd have a hard time guessing – it plays mainly as a slightly odd, technically efficient B-feature. Working from a script written by first-time screenwriter Howard Sackler, and limited to a principal cast of four in a forest setting, it's hard for Kubrick to put his identifiable stamp on the finished film. Storywise, not a great deal happens: a commanding officer and three soldiers find themselves trapped behind enemy lines and decide to wait until darkness before attempting to raft down a river that will take them back home. Kubrick made war the theme of his later films *Paths of Glory* (World War I), *Dr Strangelove* (Nuclear holocaust), and *Full Metal Jacket* (Vietnam), as well as including period warfare scenes in *Spartacus* and *Barry Lyndon*. Although it claims to be set in no time or place, *Fear and Desire* could fill the missing 'World War II' gap quite easily. The assumption is that the nature of war is so homogeneous that such details of when and where are unnecessary (it helps the budget, too), and that the events we are watching may as well be a projection, dream, or collective memory. It's probably the film's metaphorical riffs that Kubrick found most pretentious, although, as is the case with many low-budget efforts, the paucity of resources does work in favor of establishing a raw and primal mood. And while we're on Jung, how about the conflict of war being addressed as the duality of man, represented by two of the actors playing the double roles of their own enemies? Okay, I'm probably being as pretentious as Sackler & Kubrick – however, it's still interesting that In *Full Metal Jacket* Pvt. Joker wears a peace sign alongside the slogan "Born to Kill" on his helmet, which he explains as a symbol of the duality of man.

Without the means to stage big action sequences, the film-makers have their characters spend most of their screen time talking, not only to each other, but also to themselves (the lack of props and sets prompts Kubrick to focus on the faces of the men). The theatrical, existential dialogue spares us ruminations about war, but is nevertheless another likely reason for Kubrick's dissatisfaction with the picture. These

characters talk like no-one else you've ever seen in a war movie, delivering lines like "We have nothing to lose but our future" and "Who else but me is buried under the chain of everything I ever did?". Despite all the discussion, nobody seems to be listening to each other, (one character waxes poetic to his dog, as if to prove the point), and it's not until the two enemy sides meet that we're even sure that they speak the same language. Lack of communication has always been a Kubrick trademark, so it's no surprise when the only two words to be exchanged between the two sides are bluntly ignored.

Fear and Desire is less a film than a diversion. It's not terribly good, but it's not a bad film either, it's just a little different. As a snapshot in cinema history it exhibits some of the philosophy, detachment and observation that would become signatures of Kubrick's major work. It never rises above its limitations, and without a budget, big stars, special effects, or a major studio to hide behind, it leaves the film-makers exposed to the scrutiny of viewers. This is as vulnerable as Kubrick was ever going to get. No wonder he didn't want us to see it.

FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS (1998) 118m. There are always a few posers to consider when reviewing a long-in-coming film adaptation of a well-known book. Should the film be judged without reference to its source material? Should you read the book first and then view the film as its visual interpretation? What about reading the book afterwards? Should you read it at all? Shouldn't a film be its own peculiar entity, irrespective of its ancestry?

I didn't have a problem with Terry Gilliam's film of Hunter S. Thompson's book, but I imagine several others will. To begin with, it's one of those books that are tagged 'unfilmable'. I was in the fortunate position of having read 'Fear and Loathing' several years ago in high school, so by the time the film version came along I had forgotten nearly everything that had happened in the book (so, I suspect, had Thompson, if the subject matter is anything to go by). But I did remember the overall 'nothingness' of the story, which was enough to prepare me for the movie. The one-sentence plot can be summarized thus: Two men go to Las Vegas with a suitcase full of drugs and spend the whole trip off their heads. It's pointless, plotless, and indulgent. It was also the birth of what became known as 'gonzo journalism', a sort of stream-of-consciousness reportage where the journo drops all pretense of trying to say anything important and becomes his own story.

If Hunter's book is gonzo journalism then Gilliam's film takes a stab at becoming gonzo cinema. It's gleefully self-destructive. It is Gilliam fastening his lance to a Chevrolet convertible and charging at the windmills with his foot to the floor. Nothing about it is subtle. The acting and directing are uninhibited to the point of being sophomoric, and nobody is going to apologize for it. If *Fear and Loathing* tries to simulate Thompson's similarly reckless state of mind (as it was in 1971) then it succeeds on that score at least. It recreates the sensation that many of its prospective audience will undoubtedly relate to – that when you're stoned anything and everything can be funny. The opening five minutes are hysterical, but it's another thing to keep repeating those five minutes ad nauseum to the same effect. Gilliam attempts to make it as attractive as possible nevertheless, at least to cinema-goers, and those most interested in *Fear and Loathing* will be the ones going to see its heightened pop colors, drunken angles, and crystal-clear depth of field on the big screen. Those who are less interested will grab it on home video and sit through forty minutes before hitting the fast-forward button. This film isn't made for video. It is not meant to be controlled by the viewer. It's a film that controls the viewer. It wants to be the rush, and you the user. It's what I like most about Gilliam's project; there's an admirable folly in making a big-budget film supposedly for mainstream audiences and then telling them that they're going to have to learn to watch films differently if we ever want to get out of the Hollywood rut.

And in the middle of this paranoid, hallucinogenic buzz sits Johnny Depp, adding to his collection of oddball characters on screen, who is left to provide some sort of anchor to all the disorganization around him - except that Depp is just as flaky as everything else in the film, so even that idea gets torpedoed. If you hate Depp's bewildered performance – like Groucho Marx after shock treatment – then you'll be the type of person that would walk out early,

something I can imagine happening in first screenings of this film. Maybe those who did walk out didn't read the book first. Or maybe they did. Or maybe they just wanted to perpetuate the concept of gonzo film-going by buying tickets for a movie they didn't want to watch.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING (2001) 178m.

There was no shortage of Tolkien fans in the film industry who had wanted to see his 'Lord of the Rings' trilogy on the big screen since its first publication: among those associated with a possible project at one time or another were talents as diverse as John Boorman (he made *Excalibur* instead), and The Beatles (an intriguing idea which would have been fun even if the result couldn't have possibly been any good: Paul and Ringo were Frodo and Sam, George was to be Gandalf, and John wanted to play Gollum!). Decades after the book's publication, the only film-maker to produce a version of LOTR was animator Ralph Bakshi, who in 1978 had gotten as far as squeezing the first half of the story together into one movie, a decision that infuriated audience members who were expecting the entire book (in one New York screening seats were torn up!). When director Peter Jackson got the go-ahead to finally put the trilogy onto celluloid he opted to shoot three films back-to-back and stagger the release dates, saving both time and money, a decision made cost-effective by filming on location in New Zealand with a local crew and post-production studio.

It wasn't just the scale and length of the story that had deterred film-makers previously, but also the logistics and expense of creating the variety of landscapes and lifeforms of Tolkien's fantasy milieu. These may have seemed fittingly 'epic' obstacles, but it was the more basic problem of constantly integrating men with hobbits and dwarves half their size that proved one of the major stumbling blocks in past attempts at film production. However, with rapidly developing advances in CGI, Jackson was not only able to recreate convincing monsters and fantasy landscapes, but was also given the means to place 'half-sized' men alongside full-sized adults within the same frame.

The other significant hurdle to overcome was the question of interpretation. This may seem less daunting for producers than it is for audiences; for are there any among us who have not seen a filmed adaptation of a book and felt disappointed that it didn't look the way we had first imagined it? And in the Rings Trilogy, there is a lot to imagine. In some cases it may be safe to go for a generic image (The Black Riders appearing as black silhouettes, for example) while in others it might be worth taking a conceptual risk. Just going by the book leaves some room for embroidery, and Tolkien's descriptions often promote different images in the minds of different readers. The Balrog, a monster that makes a brief but memorable appearance in 'The Fellowship of the Ring', is described as a sort of shadow with wings (I'd always pictured it looking like the mountain demon in *Fantasia*), but appears as a more three-dimensional manifestation in Jackson's version. Remarkably, and perhaps because of a fusion of images that are generic, imaginative, and by-the-book, *The Fellowship of the Ring* really does look how the book "should", and I would think few Tolkien fans would be displeased with it.

The most consistently exciting of the three volumes, 'Fellowship' begins several decades after Tolkien's earlier book 'The Hobbit' left off. The power of the Dark Lord Sauron has been reawakened after an era of peace and a representative group of the free races of Middle-Earth (dwarves, men, elves, halflings) are dispatched to take the key to his power – a magical ring – to the heart of his domain in order to destroy it. Jackson's film sees the book brought to vivid life, and makes the old and archetypal seem revelatory and new. Some story material has been pruned to accommodate the cinema translation, but writing novels and writing screenplays are two different arts, and the editing works in favor of the film experience (I always thought the chapter with Tom Bombadil was a hiccup in the first book anyhow). While some characters are excised or reduced in the film, the roles of Arwen and Saruman by contrast get beefed up. You can already sense the strategy of the screenplay molding the arc of the book to audience expectations: the romance of Aragorn and Arwen is highlighted so that their wedding at the trilogy's conclusion will seem more of a post-bellum reunion and less of an arbitrary decision; meanwhile Saruman is being groomed to represent the Dark Lord by

proxy, and is established as the most visible enemy of the Fellowship (in the trilogy there is no final confrontation with Sauron, and we know how audiences love to see the villain get his comeuppance in the final reel). These roles are ably played (by Liv Tyler and Christopher Lee, respectively) and add to the varied cast that brings *Fellowship* to life. The performances cannot escape mention: Elijah Wood, Sean Astin, Orlando Bloom, John-Rhys-Davies, Ian McKellan and Ian Holm inhabit their characters utterly, creating a depth of 'humanity' that prevents the film from becoming nothing more than a smorgasbord of effects technology. The one-on-one moments between Bilbo and Frodo are just as involving as the film's many dramatic action scenes (the whole 'Moria' chapter is a show-stopper). The film is a fantasy; yet it is real, just as real as the geography of many of its epic landscapes. The menace of the dark forces is persuasive, and the One Ring impresses itself as wholly malevolent. When Boromir (Sean Bean) weeps for 'his people' at the end of the story we believe his conviction, just as we are ready to believe in the history of this entire world (this is revealed effectively throughout the narrative in stunning flashbacks, and it doesn't hurt that we get three hours of immersion into the story, either). We accept it because Jackson never tips us a wink and jolts us out of the story – he treats the tale as seriously as the characters within it.

Not unexpectedly, there are Tolkien cultists who will nitpick that somewhere in the film they heard a character mispronounce an Elvish consonant, and my own personal peeves are just as minor, if less fanatical: I found that bucolic pseudo-Celtic tootling on the soundtrack distracting (it got an Oscar for *Titanic*, so why not?); the comic relief offered by Merry and Pippin falls flat, but is at least short-lived; the Black Riders make squeeching noises that sound too much like the pterodactyls in old Hanna-Barbera cartoons; and if I had to pick a vote for miscasting, I'd go for Cate Blanchett, who appears hell-bent on making her Elvish queen Galadriel as mysterious and aloof as possible, short of waving her arms and making "wooo-ooo" noises. But quibbles as paltry as these are a clear indicator of how satisfying the film really is. *Fellowship* is a faithful retelling of a modern classic that whets the viewers' appetites for the next two films, in which they can look forward to seeing Gollum, Shelob, oliphaunts, ents, Helm's Deep, and Mordor.

FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF (1986) 98m.

Writer-director John Hughes was about the best thing to happen to teenage audiences in the 80s. His smart, focused characters were a far remove from the jocks, bimbos, and nerds that usually dominated teen-oriented fare. I'm not as taken with *Ferris Bueller* as its legions of fans, but I can see why it's so popular. Its simple wish-fulfilment storyline is appealing not only to the high school seniors it targets but just about anyone who looks back on their graduating years with fondness.

Basically, Chicago high schooler Ferris (Matthew Broderick) decides to skip an exam and takes his two best friends Cameron (Alan Ruck) and Sloane (Mia Sara, who has nothing to do in her role) along for the ride. The story is set in the same limited timeframe of several other Hughes pictures and stays frothy and upbeat for most of the way until his trademark teen angst infiltrates – via Cameron, the proverbial skeleton at this feast – and brings the story back down to earth. I think this is one of the bad calls of the film, mainly because we've seen it in most other Hughes productions of the period – this time I would have liked to see Hughes follow his main character's advice and take the day off himself.

My major reservation, however, is that there seems to be no reason why we should accept Ferris as the big wheel on campus that he is made out to be, especially when we only ever see him in the company of two of his friends. Other than to infuriate his sister (Jennifer Grey) there is no real purpose for this hero-worship that I can find. Clearly, we are meant to accept Ferris on face value, which is why he addresses us, the audience, throughout the movie. He is part philosopher, part guru, part Renaissance Man (how many teenagers know all the words to 'Danke Schoen', for example?) who can appreciate everything from ball games and Ferraris to art exhibitions and the Beatles. Matthew Broderick makes Ferris an engaging character – as written, he would be difficult to play without being smug or coy – and gets us on his side. But he's just too infallible. Ferris is so assured and thorough that we never fear

he is in any danger of being caught by truant-hating principal Jeffrey Jones. Furthermore, he avoids all confrontation by 'remote control', i.e. the meticulous preparation of tape recordings, phone calls, answering machines, prop dummies, intercoms, computers, and keyboard samplers. Without these conflicts there is no tension – I realize that this is the point of course, and that Bueller's 'day off' also includes not having to deal with authority figures, but there should have been more moments like the finale (when he has to think fast and act on his feet) that might have given us the chance to appreciate his quick-wittedness first-hand.

Broderick is at his funniest when playing the part of the loving son to his parents, but the comic highlights come mainly from his nemesis Jeffrey Jones: he and Hughes have wonderful timing together. I also love the way Hughes incorporates non-diegetic musical cues (upon the mention of a character's name, upon the closeup of a face) to often hilarious effect. Overall, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* has a relaxed, kick-back-your-heels feeling to it: it's like driving along the road listening to one of your favorite songs on the radio. Hughes eventually weaned himself off directing and turned to writing-producing instead. A short-lived TV series *Ferris Bueller* followed four years later – I'm one of the few who liked it better than the movie.

FFOLKES (1979) 86m. Extortionists plant bombs on an oil production platform, a drilling rig, and a ship they have hijacked in the North Sea. The British government sends gruff, eccentric troubleshooter ffolkes (Roger Moore) to counterattack. *ffolkes* looks like a TV-movie at the beginning (the flabby musical score doesn't help) but gets into gear once the head extortionist (Anthony Perkins) picks up a phone and makes his demands. Otherwise its routine story has a few things going for it: the shipboard location work on heaving seas inject some atmosphere, and Perkins has snappy dialogue, but the main point of interest is seeing Roger Moore playing against his James Bond role. In fact *ffolkes* appears in the middle of Moore's run of Bond films, and you have to wonder how strongly he was attracted to the part just to escape that image. It's a little jarring because while at first we see differences (ffolkes is bearded, reclusive, lives in an Aberdeen castle) we very quickly begin to draw parallels (like Bond, ffolkes is ex-navy, overconfident, and patriotic). And there is also Moore's plummy voice, which sounds very much like Bond underneath ffolkes' whiskers.

The most dramatic difference would appear to be ffolkes' attitude towards women – he is positively misogynistic. But for those filmgoers who have known that Bond's own treatment of women reveals suppressed disdain for them, this is not so much of a departure after all, and makes *ffolkes* even more interesting, in that it is Moore's own criticism of his more famous 007 role. Veteran comedy screenwriter Jack Davies even throws in a pat 'explanation' of ffolkes' behavior (it was all to do with his childhood, of course). That this is offered in a throwaway, comedic moment shows just how silly these supposedly enlightening scenes are in any given screenplay. It's obviously ironic that ffolkes is helped out by a girl in the end, but I think that it's just as perverse that the whole film finds a misogynist devoted to protecting installations that are referred to exclusively by their female names: Ruth, Esther, and Jennifer. The film's businesslike approach to action sequences makes it more believable than the blockbuster excesses that would become the standard a few years later. Similarly, Moore isn't required to be some kind of superhero – for most of the film he is surprisingly inactive.

FIEND WITHOUT A FACE (1957) 74m. A low-budget horror flick which follows similar paths to most monster movies of the 50s. A USAF Major (Marshall Thompson) is assigned to investigate the death of a local farmer near an isolated airbase in Canada. There may be a link between other mysterious deaths and radar experiments conducted by the base. Meanwhile an elderly professor (Kynaston Reeves) is pursuing research of his own. *Fiend Without a Face* falls into the wave of horror productions that presented atomic radiation as the new boogeyman of the postwar era. Its monster, however, is not the fallout-mutated freak favored by other B-pictures. In fact, it's not until the film's end that we see the creature(s) at all. The screenplay (which was based on a story written by a teenage

girl!) mixes telekinetic energy and nuclear radiation in a fairly hodgepodge manner – the professor's simple mind-concentration experiments might as well be witchcraft or demon-summoning – and its arbitrary treatment of science almost loses the only anti-war element the film has to offer. The creature is clearly meant to personify the spirit of war latent in mankind – after all, as the prof spells out, it is evil and feeds on radiation (if it feeds on radiation then why is it attacking people for mental energy?). More revealing is the way the story assumes that thoughts released to wander free of human minds will automatically become amoral and harmful. So much for the concept of free will! Besides, it's never established whether the creature is a product of the id (as in *Forbidden Planet*, which came out a year earlier), the ego, or the superego; or whether it is from the reptilian, mammalian, or human parts of the brain. At least these details might have provided some rationale for the monster, instead of simply writing off humanity as being inherently self-destructive.

In spite of flaws, it's still a notch above most B-pics, thanks to a couple of creepy moments, and a keen finale in a living room, in which the invisible menace is revealed – for once, a 50s monster movie does not disappoint in the payoff. It's a pity that the poster art and advertising for the movie used the monster so prominently as its selling point, because it's more of a shock/surprise to see it without knowing anything about it beforehand. It's one of the rare instances where tuning into a film on TV, years after it was promoted, is a better way of seeing it (i.e. discovering it) than upon its initial release. Early reviews commented disapprovingly about *Fiends*'s more unpleasant images, which is interesting, because it's the only horror film I can think of where the monsters die more gruesomely than the victims.

THE FIFTH ELEMENT (1997) 122m.

McDonald's must be more than pleased with their product placement in this lavish science-fantasy. Not only are they shown as still being in business at their fly-thrus in 2214, but the film is so heavily decorated in red and yellow that by the end of it you'll be wondering if it wasn't all some huge, sly, subliminal advertisement, and that the elusive 'fifth element' is actually McDonald's Secret Sauce.

Fortunately, I like red and yellow, I like science-fantasy, and I like Luc Besson: he showed modest-budget visual flair with his early film *Subway* and big-screen visual flair with *The Big Blue* (You can call it *The Little Blue Square* if television is the only way you've seen it). In *The Fifth Element* he outdoes himself – not since Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* has there been a sci-fi film crammed with such visual bravura. Whether it's the costumes by Jean-Paul Gaultier, or the set designs by Jean "Moebius" Giraud and Jean-Claude Mezieres (who turned out hundreds of drawings), or the bizarre hairstyles and weird creatures, the look of the film is astonishing, and it has surely met Besson's vision as he conceived it.

The Fifth Element starts with the most well-worn of sci-fi ideas, that of the link between Ancient Egypt and extra-terrestrials – but it is delivered with such aplomb that it looks almost brand new. Similarly, the rest of the film operates on the simplest of premises. In fact it is so basic, and its conclusion that 'love conquers all' so trite, that it is practically beyond reproach – Besson is more interested in orchestrating his capricious storyline than providing a mindblowing concept. It works, because his enthusiasm for this project is so pervasive (in every scene, in every new camera angle, in each new gimmick) that you can't help share his sense of enjoyment. The cast he has assembled also gets into the spirit. Bruce Willis reprises his reluctant-hero role for the part of Korben Dallas, a cab driver (or, more accurately, pilot) on the skids. He has a chance meeting with an alien envoy (Milla Jovovich) that in turn leads him to an agitated priest (Ian Holm) and a venal company director (Gary Oldman). Curiously, none of these people are responsible for his involvement in an impromptu mission (to save the world, what else?) even though they are all destined to meet again at the conclusion. The four characters are as wild and diverse as the four elements that they are in search of, and just when you think the cast couldn't get more eccentric, an egotistic, motormouthed DJ (Chris Tucker) is thrown into the mix. Everyone is playing it for laughs, including Besson, who indulges in a welcome change of pace from his recent harder-edged stories.

FLASH GORDON (1980) 107m. Gaudy, campy, and yes, even flashy, this one-of-a-kind SF fantasy would have turned out to be a completely different affair if George Lucas had gotten his wish to make it (unable to get the rights, he created his own space opera from scratch instead). Undoubtedly Lucas' version would have derived from the Saturday serials that he enjoyed as a boy, but director Mike Hodges turned instead to the original comic strips for inspiration. While Hodges wouldn't be anyone's first pick to direct a film like this (there's nothing else like it on his resume) he has to be a less bizarre choice than initial director Nicolas Roeg, the least likely candidate to handle a comic strip since Robert Altman took on *Popeye*.

The story is straightforward SF pulp (Flash is whisked away to another planet where he defeats an evil emperor who wants to destroy the Earth), and the screenplay nothing more than a series of escapades which find Flash constantly jumping from the frying pan into the fire and back again (despite the extolments of his title tune he isn't that much of a hero, and is rescued more often than doing the rescuing). Apart from a few brawls, his most dramatic achievement is to start and end the film by killing someone with a crash dive. As simple as the story may be, it is given spark by screenwriter Lorenzo Semple Jr (who had previously written for the subversively camp *Batman* TV series), whose sly dialogue is handled fittingly by the cast. *Flash* becomes comedic only because nobody plays broadly for laughs (several deliberate gags were improvised and not in the script). Amazingly, Hodges gets everyone to perform at the same pitch, whether they're unknowns from America (Sam J. Jones and Melody Anderson), supporting players from the UK (Timothy Dalton, Brian Blessed), Italian imports courtesy of producer Dino de Laurentiis (Ornella Muti, Mariangela Melato) or famous European names such as Max von Sydow and Topol.

Semple's script, as appearing on the printed page, would have belied its mock earnestness and looked straight-laced enough for Laurentiis to be unaware of how gloriously cheesy his project really was, even with the addition of retro rocketships, fetishistic costumes, and garish sets. As an example of excess, check out a fight to the death between two of the film's heroes – not simply with swords in an arena, but with whips on a floating, seesawing, spiked disc suspended miles above the ground. This is mirrored afterwards when the film's two leading ladies have a catfight with pillows on a round gold-satin-sheeted bed while slave girls watch and giggle (every time Ornella Muti appears on screen the kinkiness quotient is amped up). To cap it all off, the film is scored with a soundtrack by the rock group Queen, whose flamboyant posturing would have broadcast the message CAMP to all but the most naïve of film-goers.

For viewers raised on the post *Star Wars* boom, in which the SF genre saw a chance for renewed popularity and credibility (and cashflow), *Flash Gordon* was a puzzling step sideways. While other film-makers set out to show off their technical flair, *Flash* was refitting the clunky spaceships and hokey faux-oriental palaces of 40s serials; while films like *Star Wars* portrayed future tech as gleaming and streamlined, and *Alien* showed its flipside as industrial and realistic, *Flash* threw caution to the winds and splashed its gadgetry, architecture and landscapes in vivid yellow, purple and scarlet (about the only thing that isn't red in this movie is the blood). *Flash*'s immediate appeal was to kids who enjoyed its cartoon look, and older viewers who knew the Buster Crabbe serials or had some inkling of the film's tongue-in-cheek style – since they weren't the ticket-buying demographic, the film never did reach the same success as some of its SF competitors. But why spoil the singular nature of the film by turning out a sequel or series? Not that any subsequent director would be game enough to fill the screen with orange skies, gold-plated armor, and a title character that wears "Flash" on his t-shirt.

THE FLIGHT OF THE PHOENIX (1965) 148m. I was mightily impressed with Robert Aldrich's enthralling story as a youngster and was glad to see none of its power had been diminished upon viewing it again as an adult. James Stewart is a pilot for an oil company whose cargo plane crashes 130 miles off course in the Libyan Desert. It soon becomes apparent to the small contingent of survivors that they are beyond any hope of rescue.

When it appears they have no other choice, Stewart reluctantly agrees to go ahead with aviation designer Hardy Kruger's bold idea to construct a new plane by cannibalizing parts of the old one – if they can stay alive long enough to see their project through.

Flight of the Phoenix is an absorbing study of men under pressure, and its pace never flags: there is no wasted dialogue, no time for maudlin 'I got a gal back home' or 'I was gonna open my own business' soliloquies. There is always a conflict, a new plot turn, a grim revelation. It's grueling just watching the men in their despair, knowing that a stroll from the shade of their wrecked plane can mean death. The friction and tension between members of the group only exacerbates their situation (you can almost see the testostersone dehydrating off them in Aldrich's sweaty, confrontational closeups). There is no bonding of survivors here – if anything, they split apart and dislike each other even more intensely than when they were airborne. Stewart isn't interested in having us sympathise with his character – he's short tempered and stubborn – but some viewers may prefer him to Hardy Kruger's self-possessed designer (my favorite performance in the film). Their conflict is the hinge of the story, in which the need for leadership within the group is eventually distilled to these two protagonists. Within the group two camps emerge, those who want to organize and assume some form of control, and those who are unwilling to do anything unless ordered (and even then do it begrudgingly). This highlights an interesting human/animal trait (is it purely masculine?), namely the automatic higher positioning of any one individual within a group and the behavior system's subsequent pecking orders and hierarchies. And in *Flight of the Phoenix*'s case, survival isn't necessarily only for the fittest.

Acting performances all around are magnificent. You'll admire Peter Finch's captain, one of the few truly likable characters. He's ably supported by Richard Attenborough, Dan Duryea, Ernest Borgnine, Christian Marquand, Ronald Fraser, and Ian Bannen. Who survives and who doesn't is almost arbitrary by the film's end – you'll be more concerned about the progress of their rebuilt plane than the passengers themselves, especially at the heartpounding climax. Tragically, stunt pilot Paul Mantz was killed during these final scenes. Prolific novelist Elleston Trevor wrote the source novel, Lukas Heller the sharp screenplay.

THE FLIM FLAM MAN (1967) 115m. A lighthearted film by Irvin Kershner that should appeal to all ages. Traveling con man Mordecai Jones is tossed off a train passing through North Carolina and is befriended by a young army deserter. The older, more experienced Jones gets his newly-appointed partner to shill for him while dodging the local county sheriff and several less-than-satisfied 'customers'. George C. Scott puts a bit of W. C. Fields in his portrayal of Jones, while Michael Sarrazin (his film debut) is relegated to the role of sidekick (Kershner jokingly tilts the camera during the scene where Jones introduces himself, just so we know he's crooked). Characters come across as being stock rather than believable. Pretty Sue Lyon, in one of only a handful of starring roles she featured in after *Lolita*, doesn't have a lot to do opposite Sarrazin – sparks don't exactly fly between the two. More interesting could have been the relationship between Scott's Jones and Harry Morgan's Sheriff Slade (it certainly would have been more fun) but this isn't developed either.

The Flim Flam Man still manages to be entertaining. There are various chases and escapes on trains, trucks, cars, and a paddleboat. In keeping with their shifty con tricks, the characters keep on the move. It's also fun watching them exploiting the greed of others, and seeing each step of their tricks slide into place. The scams themselves, however, aren't that elaborate – they follow a similar formula throughout, involving either sleight of hand or misplaced trust. You'll find trickier, more absorbing ploys in *The Sting* and *House of Games*. But what the characters of those two films lack is the philosophy Jones uses to justify his self-professed trade. He's not obsessed with getting rich (he's still hopping freights), and sees himself performing a public service: his victims will become better people after seeing the consequences of their avarice, and those who are truly honest will not yield to temptation in the first place. Invariably, all his hustles involve the desire of other people to make money. It's Sarrazin who pulls the film's final scam, though unfortunately it doesn't

amount to much more than a bluff. But the whole movie is so easygoing that it's unfair to nitpick. Jack Albertson, Slim Pickens, Alice Ghostley also feature in the cast; Jerry Goldsmith wrote the music. For history buffs: The alias 'Titus Oates' used by Jones refers to a 17th century 'con man' who duped the English into believing there was a plot to assassinate their reigning monarch.

THE FLY (1958) 94m. "I shall never forget that scream as long as I live," says the police inspector at the surprise ending of this distinctive 50s horror film. Prophetic words: the finale terrorized me as a kid, visiting me many times in wandering night-time thoughts for years. It was deflating, a short time afterwards, to learn that co-stars Vincent Price and Herbert Marshall hadn't been able to keep a straight face during the filming of *The Fly*'s climactic scene. They may have thought differently if they'd known then that it was to secure a place in horror/SF popular culture, spawn sequels and remakes, and even become an episode of *The Simpsons*.

The Fly's underlying theme is nothing special – a family man and scientist (David Hedison) dabbles with things he shouldn't and creates a monster – but what separates it from other horror flicks up until that time was its solid budget (allowing for widescreen color photography, decent monster makeup, and believable sets), and its balance of horror, sci-fi, and drama. The elegant domestic setting and unobtrusive work by B-director Kurt Neumann no doubt provided an easy entry point for audiences of the 50s who normally didn't frequent horror films. Without resorting to spooky camera angles, shadows, and blatant musical stings, *The Fly* reveals its story in a leisurely manner, usually in open, sunny rooms. Only when things get to the workshop in the basement are we taken out of the daylight. *The Fly* hardly needed Cinemascope with these interior sets but perhaps the film-makers were saving the "big screen" effect for the iconic, if biologically incorrect, moment when Hedison sees the reaction of his wife through his new eyes. Now often imitated, this scene must have been an impressive shocker in 1958, particularly as it jumps out of a film which has to that point been free of tension or scares. Also unusual for the genre is that the protagonist's wife gets most of the screen time – the first time we see her she is fleeing a crime scene where she has just crushed a man's head to pulp. It's an intriguing hook into the rest of the story, compelling us not only to discover the motive, but also to chart the events which are capable of leading a pleasant and charming woman into such a gruesome act (note also the symmetry in the film's two death scenes, which open and close the story). On the other hand, Hedison, who plays what should be the main role (he is, after all, the title character!) spends half the film mute and with a bag over his head. A lot of the film doesn't make sense – the fly/man size ratio; the lingering voice of the cat even though it has disappeared; Hedison's arm acting of its own volition – and makes a barometer for what some people perceive as funny and what others think is creepy. I sway to the latter, because unlike many other horror films I saw as a kid, *The Fly* frightened me precisely because it was illogical.

David Cronenberg's 1986 remake of the film sensibly avoided all the classic moments that made the original unique or memorable and headed into a completely different direction with the same basic premise, although it did retain the love and devotion of the leading couple and against all odds managed to give a horrifying and graphic film a strong romantic grounding. I doubt Price and Marshall would have been laughing that one off so easily if they'd been around for the final scene.

FORBIDDEN ZONE (1980) 73m. Cheap as hell and proud of it. Imagine a high school production expanded onto film and you have some idea what to expect from this shoestring production from brothers Richard and Danny Elfman, who cobbled together a band called The Mystic Knights of Oingo Boingo (which stuck around for another decade and became a legitimate recording outfit) and produced a wild soundtrack that needed only a film to accompany it. The result looks a little like Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (a girl disappears down a hole, meets a frog footman, and is menaced by the reigning queen), a little like *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (complete with painted shadows, two-dimensional sets and surprisingly decent black and white photography), and a lot like the short animated film *Face Like a Frog* (which also featured an

inventive Danny Elfman score). What holds it all together is Danny's infectiously goofy music, ranging from Zappa-like instrumental fills to facetious paste-ups that dictate not only the spirit of the movie but also the silliness of the performances, (or non-performances in some cases, since the cast comes from a background of vaudeville, Warhol, and drama school graduates). *Forbidden Zone* is patently the only film of its kind that could give a home to its nutso musical numbers. We're not talking Donen or Minnelli production values and the choreography is practically invisible, but the film-makers simply don't care. To cite one triumph of no-budget musical staging, I submit the hilariously stupid alphabet song presided over by a teacher who looks like she was designed by Claymation, in a schoolroom set made out of cardboard, or perhaps, where the budget would allow it, plywood.

I still can't figure out how it took four writers to create a film without a story (multiply them by three and you'd get the *Flintstones* movie), especially as a lot of it looks like it was made up on the spot by participants telling the director "Hey, how about, if, when she says this, I do this?". Many scenes, lines, and gags are funny but a lot of juvenile, sophomoric material (there's more frottage in this film than on a Tokyo subway) could have easily been cut – although, granted, as *Zone* only runs 73 minutes I can understand why the film-makers would be reluctant to pare it down any further. I don't see the film being offensive despite its use of racial/ethnic/sexual stereotypes because these templates are so obviously taken from outmoded or exaggerated cinematic images and not grounded in any kind of reality. It's clear that the Elfmans, or Elfmen, are pilfering sounds and images from a whole gamut of musical and cinematic sources (the score is a mixture of Latin America, ragtime, new wave, and Minnie the Moocher; the animation styles veer from Max Fleischer to Python-era Gilliam), making the point, intentionally or otherwise, that pop culture regularly cannibalizes itself and regurgitates it anew. Ditto the performances, where Phil Gordon comes off as a mix of Jimmy Durante and Rodney Dangerfield, and Susan Tyrrell appears to be a cross between Mae West and Phyllis Diller. Even Danny's moments of mood music are far too similar to Satie's 'Pieces in the Form of a Pear' to be regarded as anything original but then again, everything Satie wrote is reminiscent of everything else that Satie wrote, so what the hell. Speaking of which, the Forbidden Zone itself is established as the Sixth Dimension, a step further than the Twilight Zone, but it looks more like Eternal Damnation. There are caverns, naked slaves, prisoners in cages and chains, whips, torture, pitchforks, a King named Fausto, that Dante line which practically everyone misquotes (no exception here) and a meeting with the Devil played by Danny himself. Why not ditch the interdimensional idea, which isn't used to any great effect, and make the characters take a journey through Pop Culture Hell instead? At least that would help the movie play on another level. I'm not forgetting that for some people, sitting through *Forbidden Zone* would be their idea of Hell as it is, even at 73 minutes.

FREAKED (1993) 86m. Alex Winter, best known as Bill S. Preston in the 'Bill and Ted' films he made with Keanu Reeves, co-wrote, co-produced and co-directed this goofy schlock comedy. It's almost a fanboy project dedicated to makeup FX films – the kind of thing you wish would feature cameo appearances by Rick Baker, Dick Smith, Tom Savini and Rob Bottin. It opens with former child actor Ricky (Winter, who looks like a throwback to a 50s juvie feature) hiring himself out as a spokesperson for a big corporation with concerns in South America. It's the last place in the world you'd expect to find a Freak Show, but that's what Winter and his friends run into, and then become a part of. Usually this would signal trouble ahead for those in the audience who are less than impressed with the 'ick' factor that is the standard of most makeup FX sequences, but there's nothing to worry about in this story: the off-the-wall 'freak' makeup – and there is plenty of it – is in the service of comedy, not gross-out horror.

There's plenty of amusing material to choose from in the lineup of freaks that become Winters' allies, but my personal favorite would have to be Bob Goldthwaite's 'Sockhead' (that face! that voice! a perfect combination!), who I find hysterically funny. Randy Quaid, one of the few cast members not smothered in makeup, gives a jolly, cackling

performance as the freakshow proprietor. I'm impressed that Winter got the likes of Brooke Shields and Mr T to send themselves up so outrageously while also being game enough himself to be disfigured for most of the film's running time in laborious makeup (his buddy Reeves contributes an uncredited performance and is even more unrecognizable as 'Dawg Boy'). The humor of *Freaked* is scattershot and falls flat a few times, but there's still a lot of gags to make it worth viewing. And if you're tired of computer-generated visuals then you'll appreciate the domestic feel of the film's effects – there's a whole pile of latex on show and even some claymation (which includes a glimpse of the Cyclops from *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad*). It's an energetic, crafty piece which wears two faces: an independent feature that has overcome the limitations of a modest budget, and/or a slick studio effort that is low-tech by design. Whatever the case, it still comes across as a personal project, as if Winter had always wanted to make a home movie with lots of cool monster makeup and saw his chance when he got into Hollywood. It's clear that *Freaked* is pitching for the youth market straight from its opening titles, which could easily stand alone as a video clip if you were to remove the credits. Readers of 'Fangoria' will probably love it.

FREEBIE AND THE BEAN (1974) 110m.

Pretty much dismissed or just plain disliked by many critics when it first appeared, Richard Rush's buddy-cop film did good business for Warner Brothers – enough to enable Rush to make his dream project *The Stunt Man* – and has retained a following of enthusiasts, including newer critics who didn't see the film in 1974 but were instead able to appraise it within other films of the genre. Paramount to its success is the casting of Alan Arkin and James Caan as the titular (anti) heroes, two plainclothes cops who get stuck with garbage detail, stakeouts, tailing and babysitting, none of which offer much chance of promotion. After Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* opened the door for the cinema's police officers to be two-fisted rule-breaking outsiders, it's no wonder that critics tired of seeing Freebie and the Bean doing as much head-busting as crimebusting. But now we can see how, in *Freebie*, Rush was warming up for *The Stunt Man* by refusing to broadcast scenes as 'funny' or 'straight'.

Rush's declaration to turn *Freebie* into a funhouse of machismo and violence makes the characters relentlessly antagonistic – when they're not bullying suspects they're ragging on each other, which gives the film a tone more similar to Tom and Jerry than a cop flick. We see the duo's home life in separate scenes – Caan has it easy with a live-in girlfriend who is a teacher, while Arkin gets further aggravation from his kids, a dog, and wife who he suspects of cheating on him (Valerie Harper holds her own with a sharp performance). *Freebie* is generally pegged as a comedy due to Arkin's hilarious portrayal as the frazzled Bean and the non-stop badgering between himself and partner Freebie, and it would seem that the film's destruction and violence are part of the slapstick. It's almost as if Rush decided to make a straight action piece but deliberately withheld his intentions from the players, who were meanwhile giving colourful performances. His strategy becomes clear at the end of the film, when we don't know if the conclusion will be comic or tragic, yet won't be surprised either way. To set audiences up to expect that either ending is acceptable is quite a feat. Composer Dominic Frontiere provides Rush with a carnival-like score that he would later perfect in *The Stunt Man*.

FRENCH DRESSING (1964) 86m. After earning his wings with television specials for the arts programme *Monitor*, Ken Russell was offered the Cliff Richard vehicle *Summer Holiday* for his feature film debut, but turned it down to make this breezy comedy instead. A deckchair attendant (James Hill), entertainment officer (Roy Kinnear) and freelance reporter (Alita Naughton) plan to boost the flagging attendance of a low-rent seaside resort by importing sexy French actress Francoise Fayol (Marisa Mell) to host a film festival. Russell obviously felt comfortable opting for this project because of his affection for the chintzy side of showbiz, which in this instance would allow him to stage tatty dance acts, talent shows, photo shoots, street parades, brass bands, and even a dubiously arty film-within-the-film. The continental connection also gave him an excuse to use Georges Delerue as composer, whose

work on *Jules and Jim* was more than likely in the back of his mind throughout shooting.

Because *French Dressing*'s reputation has been largely based upon its unfavourable opening reviews (it has always been the most elusive of Russell's films to see) it has generally been poorly regarded. There's never been any argument about Russell's visual talent, and stylistically his debut is full of confidence, but *French Dressing*'s problem is not its direction as much as its lack of direction. Russell cuts the actors adrift, which might be a dream for egotistical stars who always cite creative differences as the major hindrance of their performances, but spells disaster for novices and hams. As the sailor-suit wearing love interest Naughton is cute when she's smiling, laughing, and joining in the antics of the others, but far less successful whenever she's snapping at Hill or dropping in and out of her wayward American accent. She's not given much support by Hill, whose idea of flirting is to leer, grope, and make wisecracks – would anyone care if they didn't get together? And it doesn't help that the pivotal role of the French film star is played by an Austrian actress who had never made an English-language film before. Faced with the inexperience of fleshing out characters for the length of a feature, Russell shuffles his actors around in daft montages, tableaux and speeded-up footage. Despite failing points *French Dressing* still manages to be one of the most light-hearted efforts from the irreverent director, who was liberated with a widescreen palette after years of working for TV – the energy and humor of its opening scenes anticipate his up-and-coming contemporary Richard Lester. Among the film's bright spots are the cheesy entrance of the Mayor and his committee into the talent show; Naughton sitting on the pier watching the ferry depart across the Channel; Kinnear's brief attempt to converse in French; the tacky parade floats that are supposed to promote Anglo-Gallic relations; and the final shot of the trio walking away without a care for their failed venture.

French Dressing was made on the cusp of the Swinging Sixties, but isn't as dated as other films of the period that tried to ingratiate themselves on new and emerging hip audiences. It's just as carefree as the spirit of the times would like to be remembered but too caught up in its own world to reference any political or social climate (no-one has a 'real' job and the seaside setting not only highlights the freedom of the great outdoors but gives the impression that everyone is on holiday). Russell was disillusioned after its indifferent reception and returned to making television specials about composers and artists (something he may have already been thinking about when he put Kinnear in a Bach t-shirt for one scene) until he was offered a second chance and a bigger budget for *Billion Dollar Brain* some years later. Trivia Footnote: Russell did end up working with Cliff Richard in 1988 when he made a video clip for his pro-ecology song 'She's so Beautiful' – only to have it banned by the BBC, who objected to images of the Earth being kicked around and set on fire.

THE FRIGHTENERS (1996) 105m. Peter Jackson's first production outside his native New Zealand marked a division between his early fans, some of who accused him of copping out with a commercial soft sell (Michael J. Fox? In a Peter Jackson movie??) and others who were happy to see the larrikin film-maker getting his foot in the Hollywood door.

Jackson and co-writer Fran Walsh (who'd collaborated with him on his earlier film *Heavenly Creatures*) throw together a grab-bag of ideas for this comic thriller. Fox plays Frank Bannister, a conman who makes his living performing fake psychic cleansings house-to-house in the small coastal town of Fairwater. He is aided in his work by three less-than-enthusiastic spirits who are awaiting their crossover to the 'other side'. Apart from an unrecognizable John Astin, this ghostly trio doesn't provide as many laughs as they should, and Fox's familiar mannerisms don't promise to lift *The Frighteners* much above the level of a ho-hum supernatural sitcom. But not all is lost. Jackson soon shifts gears, and as things begin to get serious, so does Fox – his performance improves as the movie goes on. Oddball characters begin to spring out of the woodwork (notably an unhinged FBI agent played by Jeffrey Combs), and the plot takes new turns: Bannister is trying to help nominal love interest Lucy (Trini Alvarado) cope with the recent death of her husband; Lucy is trying to help a housebound woman

(Dee Wallace Stone) escape from her domineering mother; the local sheriff is trying to find the cause of a series of fatal heart attacks plaguing the town; FBI agent Milton Dammers is trying to pin the blame for these on Bannister. At the core of all this is a mysterious dark figure, at first glance the Grim Reaper (marvelously realized as a furious, flapping streak of robes), that is causing murder and mayhem throughout Fairwater. It's up to Bannister, of course, to stop it.

The most impressive thing about *The Frighteners* is the amount that Jackson has managed to stuff into it. In fact there is almost too much of everything: plot, laughs, suspense, special effects, action, imagination. Its only puzzle is why, in spite of all this, it fails to impress. The fans of Jackson's earlier films *Bad Taste* and *Brain Dead* will be disappointed that his gore has now become computer-generated; fans of *Heavenly Creatures* will no doubt see his new film as a step backward to his splatter days. But for every weak moment there is a directorial flourish that compensates (one of my favorites is a wild scene in a cemetery where all four protagonists are fighting each other off simultaneously); and who would have believed that a film touted as a comedy could contain a sequence as chilling as the one in which Bannister relives flashbacks of a mass murder? It is best, perhaps, to think of *The Frighteners* as Jackson's Ghost Train. It is an amusement park ride of a movie, although one tailored to the director's own tastes. As Jackson himself laughed it off, "I went to Hollywood to make a movie, and I blew it". It's obvious that he saw his chance to grab the brass ring, and made the most of the ride while he could. As should any prospective viewer of *The Frighteners*.

FUN (1994) 105m. Few would have expected Rafal Zielinski, a director of simple teenage sex comedies, to come up with this riveting study of two girls detained in a juvenile correction facility. Bonnie (Alicia Witt) and Hillary (Renee Humphrey) meet on the side of the road one morning. By the day's end they have committed themselves to a lifelong friendship sealed in a pact of blood. William R. Moses and Leslie Hope play the two adults trying to get to grips with the two girls and unearth the full story behind their crime. While both have common goals, their motivations are different – Hope is a prim, businesslike prison counselor determined to drive a wedge between the closed bond the girls have formed; Moses is a magazine journalist who at first appears out of his depth but gradually gains some insight into Hillary, the more approachable of the duo. His reasons for 'getting the story' have a resonance that is relevant to our experience of the film itself: he feels it is Hillary's duty to explain every detail of her senseless, violent crime so that she may share with his readers her experience and help them understand what makes a young teenager go so wildly off the rails. Of course, we are undergoing an identically vicarious situation by not only peering in on the interrogation of the two girls but also reliving their crime through flashbacks. Whether or not, however, we gain a greater understanding of the girls is murky. Throughout, they insist on only one motivation for their acts: fun.

I'm not sure why Zielinski chose to film the present-day sequences in black and white and the flashbacks in color (other than to subvert the convention of doing it the other way around) but they provide an appropriate contrast of worlds – the world of adult reason, where there is a clear definition of right and wrong/black and white; and the girls' own world, an ephemeral, careless playground of 'fun'. As the two teenagers, Witt and Humphrey are dazzling. Witt is so natural it's hard to believe her lines were scripted – what an ear for dialogue writer James Bosley has! Her delirious performance is what you'll remember most from this film. *Fun* is not for all tastes: these girls are frank, vulgar, and frighteningly irresponsible – some viewers may be disturbed that teenagers will identify with the characters' high-octane teen angst and take their own best-friend coteries to an illogical extreme. This seems more specifically pertinent when you remember that Bonnie and Hillary, who are greatly influenced by movies and television themselves, appear uninterested in forming any dissociation between their realities and fictions. Hillary frames her prison interviews the way they would exist in a TV-movie; Bonnie, a habitual liar, persists in reciting a scenario in which she is one of an army of invisible ninja. The irony is that this effect makes the movie appear even more real. In fact, what's most spooky about it is that its

resemblance to based-on-fact dramatizations is so strong there's virtually no distinction between them.

GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT (1973) 93m. You'll have to be in the right mood to enjoy this simple mediaeval fantasy, or at least acknowledge that it subdues the cinematic visual stylings we might expect from knights-on-horseback adventures. Although the poem, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', is one of the best known British mediaeval epics outside of Beowulf, its central character is less a household name than other Arthurian champions such as Lancelot, Galahad, and Bedevere. Personally, I find this down-scaled approach more suitable for Gawain's tale than the kind of treatment usually afforded the aggrandized romances of his better-known contemporaries. Gawain is an ordinary man, not some superhero – when he gets in a fight he gets beaten up quite a bit, and has to struggle for the upper hand. The film opens with the mysterious Knight (played, appropriately enough, by Nigel Green) appearing before Arthur's court in the New Year and demanding the head of Gawain (played, appropriately enough, by Murray Head) as the prize in a bizarre game. Given a year's grace, Gawain immediately sets off in search of the Knight for a rematch.

Bearing only a passing resemblance to the epic poem (which is more a test of Gawain's character), Stephen Weeks' film is an amalgam of two standard motifs, the Quest and Damsel-in-Distress. Its indecisive narrative may cause some viewers to give up before the story is half over, but in an odd way it adds to the atmosphere of the picture. It seems as if Gawain is getting nowhere on his journey – he is sidetracked constantly and has no clear idea of where he is heading. We can never be sure where he is or where different places are in relation to each other. Characters keep dropping out of the story and then returning, further suggesting that Gawain is making little progress. The course of the journey is plotted chronologically (the passing of the seasons), not geographically. The inconclusive musical score sounds like it was recorded without any visual cues from the film and dropped in just anywhere. All of these things make Gawain's experiences seem like a dream, but his final revelation shows us that his journey was never intended to take place on land, but instead through time. The passage of his maturation over one year gives added significance to the colour green (not only marking the order of the natural world, but also his inexperience and youth) that appears throughout the story at crucial points to guide him onwards – note that director Weeks is otherwise careful to avoid using green in all sets, costumes, backdrops and props.

Weeks' own disastrous 1982 remake, *Sword of the Valiant*, only makes this simple version look better by comparison. Since he didn't really stick to the specifics of the poem in the first place (with the exception of the opening scene), you have to wonder why he even tried a second time.

THE GENERAL (1998) 130m. John Boorman deservedly won the Best Director at Cannes in 1998 for this biopic of Irish criminal Martin Cahill (who was assassinated by the IRA four years previously). It is one of his finest works, a film that manages to look both the opus of a mature film-maker and the early work of a talented new arrival. *The General* is wonderfully assured and without the unevenness of earlier Boorman works, yet also appears an apotheosis of all that went before it: we can see the black-and-white spirited 60s of *Catch Us If You Can*, another great performance from Jon Voight (*Deliverance*), the criminal underworld of *Point Blank*, the nostalgia of *Hope and Glory*, and the man-as-myth themes of *Excalibur* and *Zardoz*. Throw in a few giant locusts and you'd be able to pull *Exorcist II* out of the hat as well (Boorman does make at least one in-joke by including a brief shot of a 'Squeal like a Pig' t-shirt that cites the most famous line from *Deliverance*).

The General scores on many levels – the acting is terrific (Voight's accent is faultless), the story engaging, and the viewpoint always open. Boorman

doesn't judge Cahill, although he does get us to admire his resourcefulness. It's hard not to like him – unlike most other crime lords he does not create a dangerous hierarchy that places him significantly at the top. True, he is the brains of his operation, but his shambolic, hangdog manner keeps him in at grass roots level with the rest of his boys. Even when resorting to thuggery (when one of the gang appears to have cheated the others), his organization doesn't appear as sadistic as others we have seen on screen. Really, Cahill is the antithesis of the gangster image popularized by films such as *Godfather* and *Casino*. Rather than grandstand in the manner of a mafia Don, Cahill shuffles about obscured by rainwear; he avoids eye contact and speaks quietly; his hand is always fluttering near his face, trying to hide it. His roguishness could almost win us over entirely if we were not reminded (by Voight's character) that his antics have lost several honest people their jobs and have terrified people inside their homes. Cahill lives an extraordinary life but is determined to keep his lifestyle as 'normal' as possible – all he wants is a nice house in a nice area for his family (in the meantime, he carries on what is seen as just a 'normal' affair with his sister-in-law!). We hardly notice the conflict because the rest of the country is in turmoil anyway – by the time Cahill, the police, and the IRA are all on opposing sides, we've lost hope for anything ever attaining normality. Maybe that's why one of the more memorable moments in *The General* is an understated housebreaking scene – a sweet, distinctive cinema moment, in which Cahill moves from room to room while a Van Morrison song plays quietly and magically on the soundtrack.

GEORGY GIRL (1966) 100m. Lynn Redgrave was never more appealing than when she played the title character in this breezy comedy-drama directed by Silvio Narizzano. As was typical of many British films of the period, this production has kinetic direction, crisp black and white photography, pop music, urban realism, social issues, and contemporary attitudes towards sex. I must admit that I have always found my interest in such films (*To Sir With Love* also springs to mind) to be prejudiced in favor of my enjoyment of their title songs, which instantly evoke nostalgia and affection – unusual, considering it was an era I was never a part of! It's a shame The Seekers, who had a number one single with 'Georgy Girl', didn't supply a soundtrack throughout the film, as Simon and Garfunkel would do in *The Graduate* the following year. They might have provided it with a stronger sense of continuity/personality. As it stands, the film is crammed with music of varying styles, which at least reflects the incidental nature of the storyline. Putting it simply, Redgrave shares a flat with her ungrateful, bitchy friend Meredith (Charlotte Rampling) as an alternative to staying with her parents, who are live-in house help for their rich employer (James Mason). She is pressured to become less dowdy and more ladylike, but being a product of the sixties, she prefers to go her own way.

Refreshingly, Redgrave isn't portrayed as wacky or rebellious, as many other young people were shown to be in other films of the time. She's a perfect alternative for young women who identified with her conservative-yet-free-spirited persona and wanted to be themselves without having to endorse drugs, alcohol, wild parties, or extreme politics. Her friends, however, are not so tame – their attitudes towards premarital sex and abortion were no doubt included to remind viewers of the changing times. *Georgy Girl* has spirit but its main problem is that its characters are too mercurial to be taken seriously – especially Alan Bates, who I find miscast here (he's ten years older than Redgrave and Rampling, for a start). By the end of the story you won't believe anything they say, but think further and you'll realize that they probably feel the same way too. Every character is trying to recreate unfulfilled wishes: Redgrave wants to set up a happy home for Rampling's baby; Mason refurbishes his bedroom in the hope he will have a mistress; Bates convinces himself that he's in love. Ironically, it is the nastiest of them all, Rampling, who really gets what she wants, when she drives off in her new boyfriend's Mercedes near the end of the film. The film's ending remains open to many possible outcomes until the last few frames. The lyrics sung over the closing credits – which you won't find on the commercially released version of the song – are unexpectedly bittersweet, especially in light of the shift of expression on Redgrave's face. She and Mason were nominated for Oscars.

GHIDRAH, THE THREE-HEADED MONSTER (1966) 85m. If you've never seen any of the monster movies made in Japan by the Toho studios during the 50s and 60s, then you might as well jump off the deep end with this offering by Ishirio Honda, their most popular director. You won't believe what you're seeing. Ghidrah is a hydra-like creature that breathes lightning and decides to wreak havoc on Japan because...well, he's a monster. In the meantime, and because six heads are better than three, old favorites Godzilla, Rodan, and Mothra (all from previous films in the series) also join in the fray, although this time around their scenery-chewing – all bug-eyed expressions and double-takes – easily exceeds their usual scenery-stamping.

I won't recount the plot (believe me, it's better this way) except to point out that it is worth waiting through the disjointed first half, which jumps between different story elements and concentrates more on the human actors than the monsters, to get to the hysterical combat scenes in the second half (Godzilla keeps screeching throughout the chaos like an enraged dolphin). Like other films in the series, *Ghidrah*'s characters are predominantly scientists or journalists (and there's usually a ship's captain that gets done in fairly early). The 'scientific' dialogue is just as nonsensical here as in other Toho films, and made even sillier by the cartoon-character voices that the actors have had dubbed over them. By the time *Ghidrah* was being made it was pretty obvious that the studios were targeting kids as a major part of their audience – at least that seems to be the case in the English-language versions. It's pretty hard to mesh the juvenile elements of the production with the busy plot, which cuts between a princess who appears to be have been abducted by aliens, scientists exploring a volcano, a group of assassins, and a comeback tour for Mothra's tiny priestesses – but all of this is forgotten as soon as the monsters meet in the no-holds-barred finale.

The most noteworthy aspect of *Ghidrah*, however, is that it marked the point where Godzilla stopped being a monster and became a hero. Godzilla, who once represented the destructive force of the atomic bomb, sheds his image of fear and vengeance and instead becomes a figure to whom the Japanese turn for protection. This has obvious parallels with the way that Japan's economy went into turnaround after their defeat in WWII and set the country on its way to becoming an influential world power. Ten years after Godzilla's first appearance it no longer became necessary for him to replay the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By the time *Ghidrah* came along the Toho studios wore their monster with pride: Japan was back in world politics with a vengeance. *Ghidrah* is also a lot of fun. This may be the best fight between four Japanese monsters I've ever seen. It must surely win the prize for the most alternative titles – it was up to eleven the last time I looked.

GODZILLA (1998) 140m. The tone of critical reaction to the American remake of Japan's beloved monster was quite public: The lizard is a turkey; *Godzilla* bites; the movie is a bomb. However, as the audiences for this movie were made up of teenagers and families and SF/Fantasy/FX fans that were taking up seats, I would propose that there should be an age at which all critics in the public domain are reassessed, in much the same fashion that drivers licenses are renewed at certain age limits. It's clear also that the writing-directing-producing team of Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin had prefigured the kind of critical backlash their popcorn movie would get, which explains why the film's most ineffectual character is a non-too-subtle lampoon of critic Roger Ebert, who had panned Emmerich and Devlin's earlier collaborations *Independence Day* and *Stargate*. I wouldn't think they are singling Ebert out personally; it's just that he is a very public face of a critical homogeneity they resent.

One obvious point that critics touched on were comparisons with two earlier films, *Jurassic Park* and the 1956 *Godzilla*. It's true that *Godzilla* poaches a lot of imagery from *Jurassic Park* and then simply amplifies it under its self-promoted precept 'Size Does Matter', but it's the original *Godzilla*, a cult movie with a huge following, that invites the more direct comparison. I agree that it was a landmark genre piece which established a new export market for Japanese films, but at the risk of offending all Gojira fanatics, I have never understood the appeal of the Toho-produced Godzilla films. It was only when

the momentum of the series reached *Destroy All Monsters*, in which every available rubber suit was brought out of mothballs for one last free-for-all scrap, that I could appreciate the divine absurdity of it all. The original also gave audiences the spectacle of wide-scale urban destruction (Godzilla's a lot meaner in his first appearance) which, again, must have been impressive in 1956 – but isn't the destruction just as impressive in 1998, even taking into account the state of the art of CGI? And even the appeal of seeing cities flattened was lost in the original series when the studios realized it was a lot cheaper for Gojira and his cronies to slug it out in open countryside. From this point on it simply became men in costumes wrestling each other, a trend which, mystifyingly, remained popular for decades to come with such TV shows as *Power Rangers*.

But in the end, it is the allegorical connection that critics will play as their trump card. The original *Godzilla* meant something: it was a national psyche which watched itself being destroyed over and over again, still smarting from the humiliation and disenfranchisement of losing the war and the traumatisation of genbaku-sho and other effects of the holocaust. How can the 1998 version compete with that? It can't, and it doesn't try. Instead, it's a calculated, hypermarketed cash cow. If Godzilla allegorizes anything, then it is the seemingly unstoppable power of the Hollywood money machine, trampling merry hell over all those who have grown out of its demographic. *Godzilla* became a battle of beasts; not just Ebert versus a lizard, but the Godzilla of film critics against the Godzilla of summer blockbusters.

THE GOONIES (1985) 110m. The Golden Age for Kids' Movies must have been the 80s, when Steven Spielberg directed and/or wrote and/or produced a number of handsomely budgeted fantasy/action films that adults enjoyed and kids adored. This era gave rise to a generation with a long-standing devotion to movies like *Gremlins*, *Indiana Jones*, *E.T.*, *Back to the Future*, *Poltergeist*, and the occasional non-Spielberg effort like *WarGames* or *Ghostbusters*. But as popular as these films remain, *The Goonies*, a comic adventure directed by Richard Donner, is the one that has earned the most noticeable cult following, perhaps because it was one of the few crowd-pleasers of the time that wasn't followed up immediately by a sequel, spinoff, revisitation or elaboration, leaving it like a moment preserved in cinematic amber. It's also likely that *The Goonies* cult perseveres because the movie plays better for adults now than it did back in 1985, when other higher-concept films made its simple storyline look like a throwback to Disney. Then, too, there was the anti-Disney decision to have its cast of kids swear and constantly heckle each other, which some viewers at the time found off-putting – in that respect at least, *The Goonies* may well have been a groundbreaker – but provided it with an element that kept it from appearing dated, for better or worse.

The 'Goonies' – kids who live in an area of town known as the Goondocks (although how property with ocean frontage can be inferred as boondocks is beyond me) – are resigned to spending their last weekend together before property developers claim their homes and they all move out of state. In a last ditch effort to save their homes they embark upon a search for pirate treasure rumored to be buried in nearby caves, running afoul of a group of counterfeiters in the process. The result is pretty much a kid-scale "Raiders of the Lost Treasure", with one cast member having already cut his teeth on an Indiana Jones movie the previous year. Because the story is so thin, Donner and screenwriter Chris Columbus keep the movie as busy as possible – the kids talk fast and overlap each other and the story evolves in a cinematic version of 'real time' where every event unfolds without pause and leads directly to the next. When everything slams to a finish at the final credits, you'll feel more like you were on a theme park ride than in a movie. The movie's finale, where all the kids' parents appear on the beach at the end of their adventure, doesn't make any sense even as a schmaltzy wrapup, but when the gang enthuse about their most memorable moments, you realize they're acting on behalf of the kids in the audience talking about their favorite scenes as they leave the theater with their own parents.

Because the story moves so fast, we don't even question why these kids are friends, so why should it

be a big deal if they split up? They're not meant to be lovable, (which is probably a good thing), and if they come over as obnoxious then it's only because of the effective, natural performances that Donner gets out of them. They're so self-absorbed that calling themselves 'The Goonies' is about the only bond they have, other than their status as outsiders (the Fat Kid, the Loudmouth, the Brain, the Puny Kid). They don't call themselves by their real names, which puts them on a parallel plane with the equally infantile Fratelli gang who are referred to as 'Ma', 'Sloth', or just 'your brother' (Fratelli itself isn't even a name – it's just Italian for 'siblings'), who make good villains for the movie because they're more like grown-up bullies than authoritative adults. If the kids are abrasive, then it stands to reason that the bad guys have to be even more so, and Anne Ramsey's portrayal of Ma is so effortlessly over the top that she steals every scene she's in. Now that the brashness of *The Goonies* doesn't seem so unusual, it can be enjoyed as a lively family film. Mention should be made of the film's opening sequence, which choreographs directing, editing and scoring so snappily that the rest of the movie has its work cut out keeping up with it.

THE GREAT ROCK'N'ROLL SWINDLE (1980) 104m. One of two documentaries about seminal punk rock band the Sex Pistols released in 1980, one year after singer Sid Vicious died of a heroin overdose (the other being Lech Kowalski's *D.O.A.*). If you didn't know anything about their rise to fame you'd swear you were watching a *Spinal Tap*-style spoof on a fictional band. That's because first-time writer/director Julien Temple treats his subject with wild, footloose humor. He mixes fictional narrative, archival footage, animated sequences, offbeat characters, and video clips of the band's most well-known songs. Before the end the film's reflexivity is layered on a little too thick, part of the reason why some viewers may find it tiresome. Others will just find it unwatchable, either because of the film's puerile approach (the sex, profanity, and violence will ensure that it's never shown on television) or because of the subject matter itself. And there are those who may object to it on principle, in the belief that Pistols manager-cum-shyster Malcolm McLaren is having a big laugh at everyone's expense. McLaren begins the film by enumerating the steps to make money through exploitation and demonstrates how he was able to manufacture a phenomenon from scratch. The 'swindle' isn't only perpetrated on record companies that were duped (for a time) but also on consumers that bought into a trend that was arguably either anticipated or entirely fabricated by McLaren.

For those unfamiliar with the McLaren/Pistols story, *Swindle* provides an insightful primer: it pointedly illustrates the role of music in the music industry; i.e. it is negligible. Here is a document that proves all the cynics right – that it is only product that matters. McLaren is completely at ease before the camera, making us even more distrustful of him. He admits his ulterior motives with such cheerfulness that we get the feeling we can't believe anything he says, even when he's letting us in on his formula for success (his ten-point plan looks like it has been constructed retrospectively and not conceived beforehand). The film's wackiness gets labored in the last fifteen minutes or so. Really, it would have been just as funny if Temple had played it straight and let the twists and turns of this absurd story speak for itself (for example, McLaren's decision to send the band straight to the heart of redneck country when they signed up for their first US tour). The Pistols' music actually holds up pretty well. Or is that a sign that new trends sound even worse?

GRINDHOUSE (2007) 191m. Robert Rodriguez, whose films are often a homage/spoof of B-pictures, and Quentin Tarantino, whose films are largely a homage/rip-off of B-pictures, had the combined clout to stage this recreation of the long-lost double feature days of their misspent movie youth. I'd never heard the term 'grindhouse' prior to this film, although I have had the privilege of seeing run-down films in run-down theaters (one sojurn to an inner-city 'bughouse', as we called it as kids, not only marked my first Bruce Lee film – *Enter the Dragon* doubled with *A Man Called Sledge* – but also the first time I'd ever seen breasts in a movie – any movie!). *Grindhouse* was intended as a uniquely cinematic experience but the film flopped when it opened and was re-edited into two separate movies

for a more conventional release outside the U.S. Much to the outrage of fans, the initial home video release of the films took the same strategy, marketing separate and extended versions of both films without all the B-movie accouterments of the cinema version, which included fake exploitation trailers, advertising, announcement cards and 'damage' to the acetate (including sprocket jumps, fluttering focus, bad splices and heavily scratched prints).

Rodriguez, whose film *Planet Terror* is the first title on the bill, sticks to the grindhouse philosophy with conviction. Using George A. Romero's films as inspiration, he creates a gooey gorefest of *Dawn of the Dead* and *The Crazies*. The action, humorous asides, and references to its 70s ancestry are non-stop, although several of its gross-out moments are too much even for that reckless decade. Despite the grisliness, *Planet Terror* is pervaded with high spirits and a sense that the cast is throwing caution to the winds with as much enjoyment as their director. Tarantino's *Death Proof*, which follows, is more problematical. It's quintessential drive-in fare right from the font of the opening credits, but as the film progresses, the fake scratches and grainy photography disappear and it becomes a Tarantino movie instead of a grindhouse knock-off. It's obvious Tarantino knew that the premise of *Death Proof* (a mixture of 70s chase movies and Russ Meyer exploitation pics) was too slim to sustain a stand-alone film but figured that making it the second half of a double bill would provide him with a convenient 'out'. The *Grindhouse* concept gives Tarantino the opportunity to take a risk and experiment a little but although *Death Proof* is interesting in its own right, it fails to live up to the premise that Rodriguez had firmly established in the first half of the bill. The main disappointment of *Death Proof* is that there is not only too much dialogue but also that it is largely uninteresting, repetitive and unconvincingly delivered by all except Kurt Russell, who steals the show. Instead of recreating 70s exploitation, it has New Zealand stuntwoman Zoe Bell talking about recreating her favorite 70s movies (which she definitely did not see at an outdoor theater in Auckland, as stated in the film, since none has ever existed there) until the finale which goes some way to redeeming the film with a wild car chase.

Grindhouse is fun when treated at a schlock level, but despite the efforts of the two directors it feels like it's missed a beat somewhere. There's a lot of contradiction in the film's execution – not only from the audience's point of view from watching fake 70s grindhouse fare in modern state-of-the-art multiplexes but also by setting the films in the present day and not the era they were supposed to be replicating. And despite the fake shoddiness of the movies there is real money and a big budget behind it all (that CGI chintz doesn't come as cheap as the real chintz), raising the idea that the directors should have put themselves on the line by making genuine Fake B-Movies instead of fake Fake B-Movies. It's questionable how many viewers would understand, let alone appreciate, the concept of *Grindhouse* to begin with. There's a moment in the first half of the double bill where the film gets stuck in the projector gate and melts (amusingly, it happens at the sex scene, as if to refer that this is the moment projectionists back in those pre-video days would be privately rewinding and replaying, consequently weakening the film). I've seen film melt on the big screen on at least two occasions – once during a Fellini film, which elicited gasps of horror and dismay from the audience, and another time during a screening of *Black Voodoo Exorcist*, which drew cheers and applause – but when it happened in *Grindhouse* there wasn't a breath of reaction, most likely because the gag referenced a time that the majority of the audience couldn't relate to. To cater at some level of in-jokiness for audiences who are not B-literate, Rodriguez and Tarantino throw in plenty of references to their own previous work, making their project doubly indulgent. Rodriguez trademarks on show in *Grindhouse* include sexy women, explosions, faster-than-lightning gunplay and a mysterious hero. Tarantino trademarks encompass specific references to characters and items in his other films, antagonistic profanity-ridden dialogue, and the resurrection of an otherwise forgotten pop song (which is wrongly attributed to "Mitch" instead of "Mick" – twice!). The beauty of *Grindhouse*, however, is that it doesn't matter if individual viewers deem either *Death Proof* or *Planet Terror* as a success or a failure. The nature of double features is that one film, more often than not, is

always going to be 'better' than the other, and neither may be as much fun as many of the coming attractions offered inbetween. The finest twist that *Grindhouse* has to offer is that its fake trailers are more entertaining than its fake movies.

GRIZZLY MAN (2005) 104m. Some background: In 2003, a bear killed two campers in a federal reserve on the Alaskan peninsula. One of the campers, 46-year old Timothy Treadwell, had been visiting the reserve every summer for 13 years; his unfortunate companion on this last trip was a current girlfriend. I'm not sure how director Werner Herzog entered the picture after this event, but somehow he got wind of the 100 hours of documentary video that Treadwell had recorded, and knew after viewing it that he had a subject for a documentary of his own, with most of the footage already provided.

The magnificent Alaskan backdrop and closeups of muscular grizzlies photographed in the wild might be an obvious visual drawcard for anyone seeing (or marketing) this film, but it is Treadwell himself who dominates the story. There are a lot of words one might use to describe this character and I don't doubt that they have all been used in various reviews of *Grizzly Man*, but if it all came down to one then that word would surely be 'delusional'. Treadwell's video diary provides a good object lesson about what can happen to people who stay in the wilderness too long. Directionless in life, a one-time alcoholic, part-time waiter and full-time self-promoter, he somehow found himself on the peninsula, was struck by the sight of the roaming bears, and became fixated with them. Cue the delusions. Treadwell was obsessed with protecting the bears (although there was nothing they needed protection from, including himself), and went so far as to film himself scurrying through the trees in camouflage gear ("It's a warning," he intones after discovering a smiley face drawn on a rock), convinced that other people didn't understand 'his' bears, which he had all given names and personalities.

Graduating from simple filmed images of the bears fishing or foraging, Treadwell started creating camera placements for pickup shots and inserts, improvised several different takes of direct-to-camera pieces, and included himself in the frame with the bears to narrate events as they were being recorded. If he ever had a plan for this footage – editing it into a film of his own, perhaps – then it's hard to know who he was pitching it for, as it is at once a diary ("Well, I'm in my tent, and it's raining"), an educational video for kids (Treadwell made visits to classrooms when he wasn't on the reserve), and a starring vehicle of his own (when in California he had tried to make it as an actor). Any notion of a structured presentation goes out of the window when, in the film's most striking scene, Treadwell suddenly erupts into an expletive-ridden tirade that shows us how far off the rails he has gone. It's here that we see what we may have assumed earlier in the film to be a consciously theatrical manner ("He's a big bear! He's a BIG bear!") is rather worryingly a fine line away from outright dysfunction.

Herzog, who ironically is himself the subject of a classic documentary of obsession (Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams*), is enough of an old hand at both cinema fiction and non-fiction to earn our trust in his objectivity in *Grizzly Man* even while he's bluntly disagreeing with Treadwell's romanticizing of the bears or making the same remarks about death and chaos that hearken back to his denunciation of nature in *Burden*. It's easy to walk away from this film without wondering how Treadwell's 100 hours of video might have been assembled by different directors according to their own agendas (for example, his 'Grizzly People' colleague's take on things would have been very different to that of the Park Service). Herzog tells us from the start that Treadwell was killed and then throws open the doors to let us see the world of the grizzlies as Treadwell saw it. The resulting effect of his manner and pieces to camera is that of an accident waiting to happen. Seeing the bears lumbering in the background as he reels off his patter with his back turned makes us feel like kids at a Punch and Judy show wanting to shout out "Behind you!". It's hard to tell what value Treadwell's own documentary – if he ever planned to complete one as such – may have had, as his constant on-camera chattering fails to convince us of any credentials he might have as a naturalist. By selling himself as an expert on these particular bears he ironically achieves the reverse effect he may have had by alternatively keeping silent and observing, as

he does do at least once, in a scene where two male grizzlies slug it out on a beach in an unbroken take (he brings it down to earth with a thud immediately afterwards, basically describing to us everything we've just seen with such annotations as how a bear "went to the bathroom" or did "number two" during the fracas).

However, it's not just all bears. Skirting around the grizzly footage are secondary players who could have provided Treadwell with a whole new angle. Remarkably, during his annual visits to the same campsites, Treadwell earned the trust of a few wild foxes that slept on his tents, ran races with him, cheekily stole his belongings, and trotted alongside him as he did his daily routines. It seems that Treadwell was so bent on communing with the grizzlies that he gave the foxes enough room to form their own bonds. If he had turned the camera in the other direction he could have gotten not only a different documentary, but also performers who were more accessible, less dangerous, and a lot more engaging. I for one would have liked to see more of the foxes. Obviously foxes would not have garnered Treadwell as much attention, gotten him on TV shows, or supported the maverick risk-taking image he liked to present, but at least he wouldn't have ended up inside of one in the final reel.

THE GUMBALL RALLY (1976) 106m. Fritz Lang once made the flip remark in a Godard film that widescreen was only good for shooting funerals or snakes. He might have added 'cars' to that observation. After thoroughly enjoying *The Gumball Rally* in a cinema when I was a kid, I was disappointed to find it flat and uninteresting many years later when I caught it on TV. It eventually took home cinema technology to bring me back to those big screen days and realize that size does matter, even to films that you wouldn't normally think of as 'big' movies. Okay, there are obvious choices: *Lawrence of Arabia, The Lord of the Rings, 2001*, and anything by Sergio Leone. But *The Gumball Rally*? It's true there are no epic landscapes, casts of thousands, battle scenes, or big budgets, but there are those long desert highways and those cars – among others, a Ferrari, Cobra, Porsche, Camaro, Rolls-Royce, Mercedes and an E-type Jag (the most widescreen-friendly of all cars, which perversely doesn't even get out of the garage in this flick). It's great to see these beautiful machines roaring across the screen for over an hour, and this is the real appeal of *Rally*. As the advertising of the time said: "The cars are the stars". This is not a film you see for its cast, but that works fine, and it's more believable seeing a lot of these second-string names at home in their cars than major Hollywood personalities playing it big.

The story is primitively simple – a group of car fanatics from all walks of life meet in New York to race each other to California (this was inspired by a real illegal coast-to-coast race, and in turn the movie had its name given to the Gumball 3000 rally many years later, which didn't honor the film's concept much by making it a trans-Europe celebrity event hyped up by the media). The angle for selling almost any film of this type is 'action comedy', but *Rally* is relatively restrained, and in retrospective, the better for it. Wackiness is replaced with practicality – the actors are seen driving the cars through almost the entire time they're on the road and their dialogue is filmed live over the roar of the engine and whipping of the wind so that they have to shout to be heard. The cars get dustier and dirtier, the drivers become unshaven, and the story follows the progress of the cars over an evening, a night, and the following day. Director and stunt man Chuck Bail keeps the stunts simple in service of the story's realism, and while there are setbacks, nothing outlandish really happens – this is the kind of film where you might expect something as simple as a broken fan belt to lose the race, not some zany mishap that sees a car flying over a cliff or into a swimming pool. This is a surprising tack for any action comedy and the slapstick becomes funnelled into the only character who never speaks, a Hungarian motorcyclist who repeatedly loses control of his Kawasaki and bears the brunt of the stuntwork.

To provide a thread through the plot there is the standard nemesis cop who's out to bust the rally drivers (particularly long-time racers Michael Sarrazin and Tim McIntire), and who we naturally expect to be foiled at every turn by the cavalier racers, but who unexpectedly finds resolution in the final scene. It's therefore surprising to me to look

back at my film diary and see that I thought *Rally* was a 'very funny film' when I first viewed it (obviously I liked it enough to see it twice in one week). It's not so much 'funny' as 'fun' – the fact that the racers are not motivated by greed (there is no cash prize at the finish line) and are just racing for the sheer enjoyment of it gives the film an underlying sense of good cheer. Unlike many later imitators (notably the *Cannonball Run* movies) *Rally* does not feature a cast of comedians and/or cameos, although Raul Julia has no inhibitions hamming it up as an Italian playboy, and Gary Busey is amusing as a cheerfully irritating co-driver. I guess for adult viewers this leaves *The Gumball Rally* as an action comedy with not enough action and not enough comedy – so why would anyone want to watch it? Hey. What can I say? Ferrari. Cobra. Camaro…

HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSPHER'S STONE (2001) 152m. It was the media's witless catch-cries of "Potty Over Potter" and "They're Just Wild About Harry", coupled with the removal of "Philospher" in the title for the American market that I found most offputting about the first film in the Harry Potter series when it debuted in cinemas. There was also the issue of Chris Columbus as director. This is the same man who just can't help dolloping sentiment into his movies for the sake of an audience response. The director of *Stepmom* and *Nine Months* doing *Harry Potter*? Insert shudder here. But then again, Columbus started out with an edge when he wrote *Gremlins* and *The Goonies*, and when I'd heard that Rowling had insisted on an all-British cast and was on hand during filming for 'quality control' I began to concede that the film might be worth seeing after all.

But if any of the above reasons weren't enough to deter would-be ticket buyers, there was also the make-a-movie-of-a-phenomenon stigma that had attached itself to the film. *Harry Potter*, however, is born of a different type of mania. Unlike *Pokemon*, *Star Wars*, *Batman*, or every other pop culture juggernaut fabricated into a movie over the previous couple of decades, *Harry Potter* has a more upmarket lineage: not of comics or video games or cartoons, but honest-to-goodness books. Yes, *Potter* is born of literature, and for once the media obviously felt that it was justified in contributing to the hoopla, as evidenced by an interminable onslaught of bimbos and newsreaders (they prefer the term 'journalists', but it ain't gonna happen) gleefully informing us of such insights that "books are cool again!" and kids with glasses are no longer "nerds".

In similar vein, you'd have to assume that the average Harry Potter/J K Rowling fan would be among the more informed of their contemporaries, and likely to view the film a little more critically than most other PG-fare. The London premiere was host to a throng of such fans, all pressed waist-high against the railings and enthusiastically clutching their copies of different Harry Potter volumes. Obviously any of these kids would have given their eye teeth to get into this showing, but they had to make do with watching less deserving personalities stroll up the red carpet in their stead ("Nah, I haven't read the book" Cher informed a TV cameraman while swishing past in a thousand dollars worth of sparkles, even though it's only a children's book and she could have read the freakin' thing on the plane over).

Looking back on the film, the hype and commercial exploitation have been forgotten to leave *Philospher's Stone* as it is: a jolly good adventure that can be enjoyed by all ages. Foremost among the movie's achievements is its adherence to the book: the tone is right, the pacing is right, and most significantly, the look is right. The film-makers somehow managed to tap into a collective subconscious and portray the book in the way that most people would probably visualize it. This not only includes the locations and sets, but also the characters – it will be hard to read Harry Potter after viewing the film without seeing Robbie Coltrane's Hagrid or Maggie Smith's MacGonagall peering out from among the pages. But it's Alan Rickman who steals the show as Harry's ambiguous foe Professor

Snape: by speaking in a low, fruity gurgle and keeping his face almost immobile for the whole movie he turns underacting into some kind of overacting, or vice versa. Harry's friends Ron and Hermione don't translate to the screen as effectively in this first instalment, but Daniel Radcliffe fits the title role effortlessly: I'd always felt the hero of the books was quite an anonymous character despite – or probably because of – his constant presence throughout the stories, but Radcliffe is both personable and believable (Harry's distracting scar is sensibly covered up by his hair during the movie).

It probably escaped the attention of most people that subsequent films in the *Harry Potter* series (paralleling the series of books) would likely come under a different sort of scrutiny. The first film inevitably bears the burden of being compared with Harry Potter in print; the others will inherit this to some degree but will also be compared to the previous movies. Ironically, the success of adapting the first novel only made things more difficult for the film-makers from that point on. Future adaptations would need some judicious editing to work effectively as films, as Rowling continued to expand upon a ritualistic formula throughout her series. We'd already seen the Dursleys, Diagon Alley, the train trip, the sorting hat ceremony, the quidditch game (one of *Philosopher's Stone*'s highlights), et al: there's no need to see these repeated when there is so much new material within the other stories. It's going to be tough. As with all films in a series, audiences don't want the next one to be just as good: they want it better.

HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE (2005) 157m. You mean that the U.S. kept the original title? After Warner Brothers simplified the first Harry Potter film's title from "Philosopher's Stone" to "Sorcerer's Stone" for American audiences, I expected to see the fourth instalment hit theaters under the revamped title "Harry Potter and the CUP of Fire". But then again, Harry's target audience had gotten five years older since then, or at least smarter than the movie's marketing executives.

I liked the storyline of the book when I first read it – school champions competing in three hazardous challenges for a tournament cup – but the contest itself seemed like a minor element amongst all the other diversions that were going on in its hundreds of pages. Unlike books, however, movies have running times, and in the fourth screen adaptation of the series, the core of the story was preserved with a few subplots along the way (and one extended detour concerning a school ball, which basically acts as a complementary challenge among the three official tasks that Harry must face, so doesn't seem out of place).

I'm not alone in thinking that this is the first Potter film to improve on the book (which means that when I'm lynched by rabid J.K. Rowling fans I'll at least have company), not only because it maintains a sense of momentum and purpose by cutting to the chase, but also because it has an much stronger emotional backbone. I've never thought of Harry and his chums as anything but written characters, but here they seem more like real people (Ron even tells Harry to piss off at one point – too bad though that he didn't save it for Dobby-the-bloody-elf, a character in fantasy filmdom who has to be even more irritating than Jar-Jar Binks). Director Mike Newell and screenwriter Stephen Cloves had the benefit this time of working with a young cast who had become more experienced over the years and were playing characters written with a broader range. Interestingly, but I suppose appropriately, the elder members of the cast remain just as they began in *Philosopher's Stone* (even Dumbledore is steadfastly Dumbledore, even though Michael Gambon took over the part after Richard Harris' passing). It's always the newcomers that stand out in each progressive film (think Kenneth Branagh in the second instalment) and *Goblet*'s addition to the faculty is Mad-Eye Moody, given life in a hilarious performance by Brendon Gleeson. Other regulars, such as Snape and Malfoy, have taken a back seat this time around – although readers of the books know that they play a major part in events to come (which is good news for those of us who enjoy Alan Rickman's performance as the bilious professor, especially as Rickman had reportedly wanted to quit the series after the second film). And of course, there is Voldemort, the villain of the stories who had only been spoken of but never seen until now. Ralph Fiennes has the thankless task of bringing this character to the screen, managing to

play him not simply as some kind of hissing, eye-rolling cliche, but as a genuinely malicious megalomaniac.

I also opt this as the best-directed of the first four movies, which is a surprise since I wasn't expecting anything out of the ordinary from Mike Newell, who had done fine work with dramas and comedies, but nothing that would suggest he could tackle a big-budget fantasy with such veracity. His Quidditch game, early in the film, is an eye-opener that perversely cuts short after building up our anticipation. He makes up for it later by having Harry in an airborne chase more dangerous than any pursuit of a Snitch could provide. Newell's film is full of spectacle, but he balances it with simple touches that help the fantasy seem more concrete. The shot that sticks in my mind more than any of the wonderful visual effects is an understated detail, played out wordlessly in the background of another scene, in which two girls in ball gowns comfort a third on the steps outside the dance hall. Of course Newell would add this grace note: has there ever been a school dance where an upset girl didn't need consoling from her friends, in either the mundane world or the magical?

HEAT (1995) 171m. It's unbelievable that Robert De Niro and Al Pacino had never played a scene together until they appeared in this crime picture by Michael Mann. This alone would be enough to earn the film a following, but even if you'd never seen these two actors before, *Heat* would still make good viewing. It began life as a screenplay written by Mann in the 70s, which was then reworked as a TV-movie called *L.A. Shakedown* in 1989 and filmed again six years later as he had originally envisaged it.

With two veteran players like these it's a tossup as to who plays the cop and who plays the bad guy, and in a perfect world Mann would have made two versions of this film, with the De Niro and Pacino roles switched (that would have been an interesting concept!). In this version, it's Pacino who's the good guy, a cop on the trail of career criminal De Niro, whose gang has just pulled off an armored truck robbery. He's been in the police business too long and has seen too much, and De Niro is his polar opposite, although just as professional in his approach to his work. While the pair of them reveal their more personal selves to women, they communicate primarily in terms of business with their male associates. It's only when Pacino and De Niro meet face to face at the hub of the story that their dialogue becomes a meld of both personal and professional, confirming our suspicions that each of them has only the other to identify with in this world.

Mann's use of neutral colours (all slate greys and chilly blues) and urban settings also appear to freeze emotions throughout the film. He doesn't allow any humor to relieve the tension of the film's three-hour running time, turning *Heat* into a brooding epic of masculinity – the title isn't just referring to police and pressure but also to the testosterone powering its protagonists. Pacino and De Niro make pains to show they're in control while also being aware that they operate on personal codes that protect them from being emotionally vulnerable. On one hand, they provide each other with distraction from the issues of commitment that puzzle and hurt them; however they also know that they are helping each other tear their worlds apart. When they're forced head to head, they come out with guns blazing. In most other crime films, this shootout would serve as the story's climax, but as it deals with the characters' conflict on a superficial, machismo level we don't expect it to be any suitable resolution. That's why Mann's lengthy story doesn't seem overlong – or rather, it doesn't seem inappropriate that it's overlong. Beyond the shootout there must be another more intimate – but just as deadly – confrontation. Mann's precise direction (the timing of every scene and cut seems flawless) and investment into the hearts and minds of the characters make *Heat* something grander than the flashy crime films we're most often accustomed to. Actors who have worked with him agree that he's a perfectionist, and here it pays off.

HEATHERS (1989) 102m. You'd think that a comedy about a topic as touchy as teenage suicide would be box-office poison, but check this one out anyway. *Heathers* is a cool, sharp, satire about a group of high school seniors who make the discovery that you can be more popular dead than alive. Winona Ryder is Veronica, a satellite member of an

exclusive tripartite sorority in an Ohio high school. Enter Christian Slater (in Jack Nicholson mode) as JD – Jason Dean, a rebel without a conscience – who sees more potential in Ryder than membership in a school clique. The confusing relationship between Veronica and JD is what sets events in motion: although Ryder is appalled at what he does, she can't fully extricate herself from his schemes. And what are those schemes exactly? Even JD doesn't seem to know ("Chaos is great!" he exhorts) and his phoney family life offers only the most rudimentary of clues. But the universe of *Heathers* is too out of kilter for us to have any concerns about Slater's character – it's easier to simply accept him as an agent of change who has breezed into town. JD knows he is fatally flawed (which probably explains his affinity with Captain Ahab), involved as he is with an anarchic quest which no-one apart from Veronica seems capable of understanding. It comes as no surprise that his preoccupation with murder and suicide (which he doesn't differentiate between) escalates into the film's self-destructive climax.

The potentially offensive subject matter of *Heathers* is defused right from the film's opening – if you're willing to believe that three girls all coincidentally named Heather are running their campus then you'll go along with the notion of death as just another cruel high school prank. The cast play every scene straight, regardless of its absurd or unnerving context – but it's also this neutrality (i.e. neither truly scary or laugh-out-loud funny) that leaves me wanting. On the plus side it does have several quotable lines and a supporting role by Shannen Doherty (who would reprise her Bad Girl on Campus role in TV's *Beverly Hills 90210*) as the second 'Heather' in the pecking order. The film's cult popularity is a little disquieting when you realize that two girls were poisoned by their fourteen year old 'best friend' who was copying the murders she'd seen on screen – it makes me wonder how prominently the revenge element of *Heathers* features as an attraction for its fans.

HELL'S ANGELS (1930) 127m. An astonishing feat for its time, *Hell's Angels* came about only because producer-director Howard Hughes was wealthy enough to bankroll it himself. Those expecting a biker movie will be disappointed (the well-known motorcycle gang took their name from the term invented for this film) because the "Hell's Angels" of this picture are the flying aces of WWI. Hughes' passion for aircraft was the springboard for the flimsy plot, which was nothing more than an excuse to get planes into the air and film them. Everything else in the story remains decidedly earthbound, although it does at least avoid a Hollywood ending (is this the first film to show a bullet impact upon a body?), and even surprises us when one character, who we assume will be around until the end, is dismissively killed off halfway through.

Three friends (Ben Lyon and James Hall play brothers) are called upon to enlist when war is declared – and not all of them are fighting on the same side. A love triangle (courtesy of Jean Harlow, who went from Hollywood extra to principal in one stroke), a few postulations about the senselessness of war, and a couple of air battles make up the rest of the running time. The opening scene doesn't promise much more than one of the worst-acted and worst-scripted films of the 30s – there's a German barmaid who has to be seen to be believed – and despite having four screenwriters, a dialogue writer and dialogue stager (none other than director James Whale) the acting is so clod-footed that the only time it doesn't get laughs is when it's trying to be funny. But nobody is watching *Hell's Angels* for its performances: the two spectacular set pieces are as much the audience's reason for viewing the film as it was Hughes' reason to make it. In the first of these, a Zeppelin floats menacingly above London while planes search for it in the night; in the second, English and German squadrons play out a free-for-all dogfight high above the clouds (the excesses of this final battle may be better appreciated by viewing Martin Scorsese's Hughes biopic *The Aviator* beforehand).

A multi-millionaire while only in his 20s, Hughes had the brash energy to take chances and make innovations that keep *Hell's Angels* worth watching today. The acting may be hammy, but understandably so in that Hughes, eager to use new 'talking pictures' technology, switched from making a silent film to a sound one – his use of sound editing, in which the pitch of the plane engines in the dogfight sequence

changes as the camera cuts to different cockpits, can be seen influencing films as late as *Star Wars* in 1977. Hughes further experimented with sound by having events take place offscreen so that they would be heard and not seen; he also dared to stage entire conversations in German without subtitles, and has some characters use exclamations like "Jesus!" and "For Christ's sake!", which would never have been written as intertitles in silent films. The miniatures in *Hell's Angels* are impressive enough to indicate that the aerial combat scenes could have been shot using models alone if the film-makers had wanted to, but the major attraction of the film is to see real biplanes swarming in the sky – it's surely as big a thrill for aviation buffs to see this sequence as it is to see B-25s taking off *en masse* in *Catch-22*, or to see airworthy Mosquitos flying in *633 Squadron*. By using real planes, Hughes was able to get POV shots of the sky twirling as planes go into tailspins, which must have been remarkable to audiences who saw it in cinemas in 1930 (three stunt pilots lost their lives filming these scenes). He also filmed one sequence in two-strip Technicolor and tinted the climax of the Zeppelin chase with not one color, but two, to great dramatic effect.

Hughes would direct only one other film, *The Outlaw*, several years later, because ultimately his interests took him beyond Hollywood. *Hell's Angels* sees him in his heyday, a rich kid who exemplified Orson Welles' remark that movie-making was the biggest electric train set a boy could ever have. Or planes, for that matter.

THE HELLSTROM CHRONICLE (1971) 90m. If you're already thinking 'maelstrom' or 'hell storm' then you'll understand the marketing strategy writer-director Walon Green used to dress up this feature-length documentary about insects. Stitching together footage of various bugs, Green dispensed with offscreen narration and created a character named Hellstrom, (whose fictionality is revealed in the end credits) a doomsayer with a doctorate whose view is that the reign of humankind will be brought to bear by the massed insect population of our planet. While there's nothing too scary about butterflies and ladybirds, and no threat from mayflies whose life span encompasses a single day, *The Hellstrom Chroicle* bases most of its scaremongering on those insects who create social systems (ants, bees, termites) and are therefore capable of organizing themselves to get even for every one of them we schpritzed with a spray can. However, in a morbid reflection of the insect-human comparisons that Hellstrom is fond of making, they're too busy fighting among themselves to bother with the rest of us. Entomological societies may invite parallels, but as individuals the insects are presented as completely alien beings worthy of Sci-Fi pulp mags and movies; and one can see the inspiration for such big-budget monster movies as *Aliens* and *Starship Troopers* in their physiognomy.

As Hellstrom, actor Lawrence Pressman tries not to play his role over the top although he's almost smacking his lips over such adjectives as "heathenistic" to describe the insect hordes that earn him as much admiration as they do loathing. Compare the opening scenes of this film to the 'other' cult 70s nature documentary *The Secret Life of Plants*, which begins in the same way with a montage of volcanoes erupting and land masses forming but without the livid prose about the Earth being raped, which suggests the images could be of an apocalypse just as effectively as a creation. Hellstrom might be a few ants short of a picnic, but it didn't stop many viewers being suckered into believing that we were in imminent danger of swarms (the spread of killer bees in South America was making news at the time). *Hellstrom* also draws upon our exposure to SF movies of the 50s, which saw any number of creatures surviving atomic blasts, to drum home the likelihood of insects inheriting the Earth after human beings have poisoned or irradiated themselves out of existence. For those unversed in mutant bug movies, he also throws in a biblical plague of locusts. Our fear response to the insect footage is further manipulated by spooky musical effects, of which three always seem to be popular in such docos, namely (a) arrhythmical pizzicato that sounds like comb teeth being plucked, (b) metal being scraped along piano strings, and (c) lettuces being leisurely sliced and groped. The film goes too far trying to impress us, however, when it sets up Candid Camera style footage of people discovering cockroaches and suchlike in their food.

For those of us who saw *Hellstrom* on TV as impressionable kids, it's probably the one documentary from which we can remember the most images, even if they have been repeated in countless nature shows on TV. It's a great looking movie that holds up favorably in comparison to much later films like *Microcosmos*, and proves that no matter how much the technology of photography has developed over the decades, you still can't get any closer to a bug, and they're not going to behave any differently even if you could.

THE HIDDEN (1987) 96m. In what could be a pedigree of his *Twin Peaks* role as FBI agent Dale Cooper, Kyle MacLachlan plays an otherworldly FBI agent in search of a psychotic killer on the loose in L.A. He teams up with local detective Michael Nouri after the killer has been cut down in a police shootout and tries to convince him that their problems are far from over. As we quickly discover, the real killer is an alien parasite that moves from body to body, rendering it nearly impossible to find. The good news is that almost immediately after infection the new host exhibits telltale behavior patterns, revealing the true nature of the alien hidden within it. The bad news is that these signs usually include car theft, bank robbery, and homicide.

Look at *The Hidden* one way and it's almost a 50s Juvenile Delinquency picture – the notion of alien-as-hedonist incorporates the same elements used to drive a wedge between the cinematic generation gap of that time: sex, fast cars, loud rock music, destruction of property, and living like there's no tomorrow. But even though all of the alien's incarnations commit acts of casual violence the strange overall impression is not so much that it is wrong to steal or kill but that in a civilized society it is simply wrong to do whatever you feel like. Just to confuse the matter, the alien chooses middle-aged subjects for its hosts (I suppose in some cases it doesn't have much choice). Was this because the portrayal of younger people going on a shooting rampage was too uncomfortably close to reality? It would have at least drawn attention to the J.D. motifs in the film. I'll concede that it's the juxtaposition of the hosts' careworn appearances against their repugnant activities that provides much of the film's humor. Especially effective is the alien's second host body (William Boyett) whose monosyllabic delivery, beady eyes and tight-lipped expression make him both amusing and unsettling. It's useful that Boyett gets more screen time than the other incarnations because it gives us a chance to compare him with the much more sedate (but equally elusive) MacLachlan.

The Hidden manages to make the old alien-parasite routine look fresh thanks to great pacing that doesn't let up from the opening car chase (exciting on a big screen), but thinking over the storyline and script, you'll realize that this could have been a terrible film. As it turns out, Bob Hunt's script is served well by good acting, fine photography, great effects, and energetic direction (by Jack Sholder). It's one of the few B-movies you'll see with an A budget – don't tell me that any film that totals a Porsche in the first scene is made on the budget of a B-movie! The ending, although strangely neutral (it's neither totally satisfying nor unsatisfying) suggests in the final shot that a whole new, different story is just beginning. I was glad they left it up to our imaginations instead of churning out *Hidden II*...for a while. Sure enough, seven years later a crummy sequel turned up. What was that about alien parasites?

A HIGH WIND IN JAMAICA (1965) 104m. An excellent adaptation of Richard Hughes' novel, and one of my all-time favorite films. If you've ever wondered what might have happened to the Lost Boys if they'd left Neverland and taken up with the pirates then this one-of-a-kind drama may show you some possibilities. An English family living in Jamaica decides to return home after a hurricane destroys their house, its mother believing her children have lost the civilizing influence of life in England. The children barely make it out to sea before they inadvertently end up on a freebooters' ship, captained by Anthony Quinn and first mate James Coburn, from which point on the storyline moves in quite unexpected directions.

A High Wind in Jamaica is not told exclusively from the point of view of either the adults or children, but rather from the ambiguous area where both viewpoints meet in conflict. We accept that each character's behavior is completely rational (partly because we recognize the conventions of adult life

while still remembering the world of childhood) but the characters themselves fail to comprehend each others' differing world views. It's this conflict that eventually creates a strange power play on board ship between the pirates and the children. The sailors' superstitions and fears become realized through the games and antics of the youngsters – placed within a different context their innocent capering takes on new, ominous dimensions – and it isn't long before the entire crew is on edge.

Quinn and Coburn make great pirates, but it's Deborah Baxter as Emily who you'll really remember – whatever happened to her? Emily's concerned eyes and searching expression tell us more about what's going on inside her head than any other character: here is a girl who is uncertainly taking the first steps into that nebulous zone between childhood and adulthood – this voyage could be interpreted literally as her rite of passage. As this area is where the film's perspective lies it could be that we are approaching the story from her viewpoint. Emily, like Jenny Agutter at the conclusion of *Walkabout*, looks back on a strange, dreamlike event in her life and wonders if she has lost something, yet still gained something because of it. The film's narrative is constantly engaging. Director Alexander Mackendrick handles the intelligent screenplay with a deft touch that keeps the film from self-consciously recognizing its own offbeat quality. Harmonica player Larry Adler wrote the score, which makes good use of swoony, seductive Spanish themes and contributes even further to the dislocated overall effect of the film.

THE HITCHER (1986) 90m. Hitch-hikers have always been good material for horror stories, but this effort is classier than most. That's not to say it is entirely without its B-movie elements. The story is at once simple and complex. Jim Halsey (C. Thomas Howell) picks up a hitch-hiker (Rutger Hauer) on a Texas road in the middle of nowhere. Within the next quarter-hour of screen time, this hitcher has pulled a knife on him, forced him off the road, narrowly missed running him down, and almost blown him up. This is familiar territory for most psycho-killer stalk-and-slash fare, and audiences usually don't give the killer's motives a second thought. He's a psycho, ergo he's crazy and kills people. Enough said. But *The Hitcher* transcends this convenient movie mindset and after a while it becomes clear that Hauer is not trying to kill Howell (though he comes awfully close) as much as scare the hell out of him. It's almost as if he is a psycho 'playing the part' of a movie psycho, and Howell is his audience. In the creepy opening sequence, in which Hauer evades all of Howell's questions, we are given only one indication of the stranger's intent. "Stop me," he says. From that point on Howell is plunged into a waking nightmare, realizing that the hitcher is on a killing rampage that he has unwillingly become a part of.

It's the hitcher's motives that provide the puzzle in this film. One possible explanation for his behavior is that he has totally divorced himself from his conscience, and by externalizing it in the form of Howell (who he may suspect is too weak to stop him), has passed on all responsibilities for his actions so that he can commit his violent acts with abandon. As he realizes that Howell is too soft a touch, he toughens up his campaign, which turns out to be bad news for anyone Howell comes into contact with. But a more intriguing idea behind Hauer's motives is that he is a latter-day Flying Dutchman, doomed to wander the hellish desert roads from one end to the other. When investigated by the police he is found to have no past record, driver's license, or any means of identification whatsoever. He has seemingly come from nowhere. The name he gives Howell upon their first meeting is the obviously pseudonymous "John Ryder". Has he found a way to end his curse – or worse, pass it on – by goading Howell to end his life? (When he places coins on Howell's eyes, he is suggesting that he is damned). Significantly, during their final confrontation, Hauer drops a chain to the ground and smiles: he is free at last.

The Hitcher has moments that are alternately nail-biting and exciting. Top-notch cinematographer John Seale makes this one worth seeing on a long screen, if only for the wonderfully-framed shot of two police cars spinning end over end along the road. The script and direction by Eric Red and Robert Harmon stay focused. And Hauer makes a great villain – we can't really hate him even though the things he does are horrifying. Jennifer Jason Leigh, who'd been at odds

with the villainous Hauer the previous year in *Flesh + Blood*, plays the 'love interest' and 'victim interest' for both leading players respectively.

THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY (2005) 109m. They pulled it off. It took twenty years of frustration for author Douglas Adams to bring his cult radio series/novel to the screen – so long, in fact, that he died before ever seeing it complete – but if it was this gestation period that was responsible for the finished product, then the wait was well founded. It had, of course, already been served up as a British television series (which Adams didn't like at all) but the tatty production values and effects were woefully incapable of presenting the wild conceits of the story, leaving fans of the book/radio show to fall back on their own imaginations instead. After all, how could anyone capture Adams' wild flights of fancy on film?

In any given paradigm, the world always seems to be divided into two types of people. In the case of *Hitchhiker*, the world (the Universe, and Everything) is divided into fans of Douglas Adams, and those who have never read anything by the man. As far as movie marketing is concerned, this can be a tough or easy sell, depending on which half of the glass you prefer to look at: it's a risk to turn a quirky property into a mainstream blockbuster, but on the other hand it has a ready-made cult audience. Do you cater for fans or novices? Is it better to adapt a purely visual rendering of the source material, or to modify the story in ways more suitable for film narrative? In the case of the former, the film may adhere so doggedly to the original text that it becomes nothing more than a 'visual novel' (one criticism of the early *Harry Potter* films), in the case of the latter, devotees of the original will complain about liberties taken and how the movie 'ruined the book'.

There's no pat answer, but *Hitchhiker* is able to circumvent this dilemma by two means. Firstly, the evolution of Adam's story through radio, print, interactive fiction and television has given him the opportunity to add or drop scenes within the framework of the plot, eliminating any preconception of a definitive text. Secondly, and more broadly, there is the matter of tone. The film version of *Hitchhiker* succeeds in capturing the spirit, energy, and all-around general feeling of Adams' work, an achievement not so much of the writing (which follows all previous incarnations faithfully) as it is the acting and directing. It is an example of a case of the right people coming together so noticeably that you wonder how often such things can occur at all.

The Guide of the title is a travel book for intergalactic backpacking (its real but more Earthbound counterparts became all the rage after Adams' book hit the shelves), discovered by underachiever Arthur Dent (Martin Freeman, who wears his bathrobe as if he were born to it) when his friend Ford Prefect (Mos Def) declares himself to be an extraterrestrial and whisks them both off the planet seconds before it is destroyed. It follows suit that he will meet many outrageous personalities and be catapulted into a series of misadventures, and the pleasure of first-time viewers will be to see what imaginative and amusing turn the story will take next. The film is so laden with special effects that they're pretty much taken for granted, but when we're shown something new – e.g. the ride across the factory floor of a planet manufacturer – we sit up and take notice. Equally commendable is that first-time director Garth Jennings knows when to pull back – when the script calls for pan-dimensional beings to assume the guise of white mice, they're not conjured up with CGI, but are represented by a couple of real mice with discreet digital enhancement around their mouths. Why? Because it's funnier that way, and Jennings and his cast know that their film is a comedy first and a science-fiction FX movie second.

It's a great pity that Adams wasn't able to see his story finally served up on the screen. I'm dubious about the happily-sewn-up ending, which I suspect was a safety measure in the event that the box-office returns didn't guarantee a film of the book's sequel 'The Restaurant at the End of the Universe', but I'm sure the ecologically-spiritual Adams would have approved of the triumphant final scenes of life evolving and flourishing on Earth. Watch for an effectively ephemeral tribute flash on screen before the end credit 'For Douglas', one of many asides, references, Easter eggs and in-jokes scattered throughout the movie – so many, in fact, that it wouldn't surprise me if a Guide to the *Hitchhiker 's*

Guide didn't exist somewhere in the multiverse. Sounds suitably Adamsian to me.

HOLLYWOOD RATED R (1996) 90m.

Something special for all of those interested in exploitation films, and an education for those who've never seen any. This appropriately exploitative documentary (there's nudity and coarse language) by directing team Doug Headline and Dominique Cazenave takes us through the fifties, sixties, and seventies and looks at the changes in non-Hollywood products, charting their evolution from nudity to violence to horror to drugs to blaxploitation. There aren't many film clips but plenty of trailers, which unfortunately are of a very poor photographic quality and give the impression that these films looked a lot worse than they actually were (I have yet to see *The Crawling Hand*, but after seeing the promo I think it should be a priority). It should be pointed out however that the trailers were often more entertaining than the films themselves: nowhere today, for example, would you see a film advertised with the shrieking tagline (and possible solipsism) "See a human being murdered before your eyes!"

Mostly, though, *Hollywood Rated R* is a collection of talking heads – as the interviews are delivered with such affection and interest for the subject, the one and a half hour running time passes quickly. John Landis almost steals the show with his enthusiastic performance, but there are many other delights in store, often of the two-for-the-price-of-one variety: e.g. Charles Napier tells us about his career with Russ Meyer (and offers an interesting explanation for Meyer's use of remote locations); David Friedman talks of his collaboration with goremeister Herschell Gordon Lewis; Barbara Steele gives a surprisingly animated interview about the role of women in film, referring to her work with Mario Bava and Jonathan Demme; and Forrest Ackerman and Joe Dante reminisce about the William Castle movies they saw as kids (how I envy those guys!). I wish Headline and Cazenave had cut a couple of the slower interviews – there's a labored one which is intercut with all kinds of gags and sound effects, but it still doesn't come across as particularly interesting – and gotten someone like Paul Bartel on screen instead. If you've never sampled this unique genre of films, then this may well whet your appetite. The film's most interesting line comes from director Larry Cohen: "All movies are exploitation".

HOW TASTY WAS MY LITTLE FRENCHMAN (1971) 84m.

Brazilian natives capture a French mercenary (Arduino Colassanti) while fighting the invading Portuguese and tell him that he will be eaten after six months of forced residence in their village. Nelson Pereira dos Santos directs his film in a documentary style, with much harsh natural lighting and a hand-held camera that often lingers over events playing out before it. The primary point of the film is to show us the 16th century culture clash of Europeans and native South Americans but because this is a Brazilian film it's impossible to ignore any attendant political criticism of European colonial practises during that period of history (the film-makers should have taken a hearty bite out of the Spanish while they were at it). The story is interspersed with historical quotes which aren't as ironic as you would expect after watching the pre-title scenes, which have a different beat to them than the rest of the film.

I've never seen any appeal in the cannibalism sub-genre (these movies are either pretentiously metaphoric, witlessly Freudian, or good old-fashioned gross-outs) but it's a theme that suits the film's purpose very well. Unlike other directors such as Ruggero Deodato or Umberto Lenzi, who exploit documentary techniques to make us recoil from the mix of fictionalized cannibalism and factual brutality, Santos keeps the cannibalism theme present in the background only. The fertile, natural setting, lazy lifestyle and nubile native women (there's barely a stitch of clothing to be seen in this movie) make us forget any such threat – even Colassanti and his appointed wife laugh over the details of his death ritual – and because the village's "captive" is not caged and roams the small island we have the impression of him as a free man. Furthermore, it's hard for us to view Colassanti as the same person – or victim – we were introduced to at the beginning of the story. He throws away his clothes, shaves his beard and head, and goes native, essentially integrating himself into the tribe's lifestyle and helping them fight their enemies. In one sense, he

becomes a worthy addition to the village, but in another, he's also the kind of guy any chief would be proud to eat. By stripping Colassanti's life – and the movie – to its essentials, Santos pares down the politics of aggression for what they are: men eating other men.

HUGO THE HIPPO (1975) 90m. To see this animated film from Hungary is to truly appreciate the word 'boggle'. Your eyes will boggle. Your mind will boggle. You will have never undertaken such boggling. *Hugo the Hippo* could be described as the worst film the Beatles never made. Its *Yellow Submarine* aspirations are obvious, its Marie-and-Jimmy Osmond songs just bewildering. The story might make sense to younger viewers, who have more compartmentalized ways of digesting plots of feature length, and *Hugo* does have a support group of adults who fondly remember the film when they saw it as children, although I suspect they remember the event more than the narrative. Am I being too hippo-critical? I'd submit that many of us have revisited cartoons that we loved as kids only to discover they were embarrassingly lame when seen again years later (I've winced too many times on this score, which is why I can't bring myself to risk checking out re-runs of old favorites like *Kimba the White Lion* or *Speed Racer*). However, to watch *Hugo* for the first time as an adult was, for me, a different experience. To wit, like watching an animated traffic accident. More than anything else, the word 'collision' kept returning to my mind. Second place went to 'Huh?'

And so to the plot: the clove industry of Zanzibar is under threat when sharks invade the bay (they are dressed to look like bikers; whether or not they were supposed to look like gay bikers is another matter) and start eating the workers loading the ships, prompting the Sultan (voiced by Robert Morley) and his magician (voiced by Paul Lynde) to come up with the unlikely strategy of transporting an inland hippo herd to the bay as protection. What follows is too random to outline at length, but Hugo, the youngest hippo, becomes orphaned and encounters a group of children who look after him throughout a number of difficulties, until his rightful position in Zanzibar is restored.

The growing insanity of the plot (which at one stage becomes a war with vegetables in outer space) and the dreadful song lyrics (Hugo is so hungry that he could "eat the ox in oxygen") are so distracting that they overshadow the film's most significant failing point: Hugo is completely uncharismatic. He appears to have been drawn from an animal cracker and has a face made of buttocks. He doesn't even speak. When the children all rally around Hugo in the finale and sing "wherever you go, we go!" we ask ourselves "Why?" The poor rendering of the central character is one of many bad judgments that weaken the film (or improve it, depending on how bad you want it to be) and make you wonder if there was any one guiding force behind the project – it has such a crazy-quilt feel that it looks like a horse designed by committee. I don't find any fault with the animation, which has been handled with some imagination (at least they have a bit of fun with scene transitions), and the earthy color palette (burgundy, slate, straw, etc) tries to do something a little different by acknowledging the film's African setting. The film's status as camp is assured not only by the Osmond tunes but also the hilarious miscasting of Lynde, whose inimitable speaking manner turns two-syllable words like 'sultan' into two monosyllables (once you've heard Lynde as The Hooded Claw in *The Perils of Penelope Pitstop*, you're not going to be able to picture him as anyone else). It all starts promisingly enough with Burl Ives' chummy narration – he's a natural for storytelling – which informs us that this story is about a hippo, which is a short way of saying 'hippopotamus', which is a long way of saying 'river horse'. But after that, it's all downhill. In short, this review is a long way of concluding that *Hugo* is indeed a river horse – although one designed by committee.

I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE (1978) 98m. It was one thing to have films like this playing in cinemas back in the late 70s, but another to have

them on hand for home viewing in the years soon to follow. *I Spit on Your Grave* became one of the 'video nasties' that many self-appointed watchdog organizations condemned without really having being aware of its previous existence as a 'cinema nasty'. It's unpleasant viewing, but not unwatchable. Plotwise, it's as basic as you can get: a magazine writer (Camille Keaton) rents a house in the woods so that she may work on a novel. She attracts the attention of a group of men who brutally assault her. After recovering, she seeks them out for revenge. It's the primal nature of the film that repels many viewers (it was banned in several countries), the inference being that a story this simple cannot have any redeeming subtext. As if to flout this point, the rape sequence that caused most of the controversy is protracted unflinchingly. It isn't helped by the murkiness of director Meir Zarchi's motives – is this scene out-and-out exploitation or is he trying to present the nature of rape in all its ugliness? At least he can't be accused of making it arousing, exciting or titillating. Keaton's attackers are a reprehensible bunch and you won't care what happens to them, but perversely the film-maker's dehumanizing of the men is just as bad as their dehumanizing of Keaton. Two wrongs don't make a right, whether in a story a basic as this or as fluffed up as 1998's courtroom drama *A Time to Kill*.

I'm not suggesting that Zarchi included themes in his film so that it could be viewed on levels other than its obvious exploitation, but some strands do become noticeable. It's a straightforward enough ploy to necessitate a character's isolation by making her a novelist, but it's interesting that the first thing we see Keaton do after recovering from her ordeal is write (anybody else would have contacted the police). She creates her own scenario of revenge, playacting with the men and turning their own egos and machismo against them, while also using weapons and tools unwittingly supplied to her by the men themselves – the kind of thing that would appeal to any scenarist's inclinations of poetic justice. She also arranges confrontations to take place in or near water, as if her writing sensibilities require any cleansing on her part to be represented symbolically. It would be easier to give these notions more credence if Keaton didn't keep stripping off her clothes during these scenes. In some ways the use of her body as a lure is in line with her sense of irony but it also comes across as just another cheap thrill from the director. What finally deflates any serious intent of the film is the way that Keaton's vengeance falls apart at the conclusion: without a plan she simply becomes randomly murderous. Is this any improvement on calculatingly murderous? That in itself is an idea worth developing, but you won't find any answers in this picture: the film's title change from the original *Day of the Woman* pretty much established where the distributors were standing on this one.

I WOKE UP EARLY THE DAY I DIED (1998) 90m. What would legendary 1950s Z-grade film-maker Edward Wood Jr have made of a postmodern world in which his films were lauded by fans and unfinished projects were restored and reworked decades after his death? Becoming a cause celebre after the 1970s "rediscovery" of his impoverished, inept *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, Wood garnered recognition from a new type of film audience: aficionados of schlock cinema. During the next twenty years the Wood well was drawn dry, with every scrap of celluloid and writing brought to the screen with more élan than even Orson Welles archivists could muster. It's fun to imagine Wood being resurrected, as were so many of his screen characters, and brought into a cinema in 1998 to witness this film of his last unproduced script. It wouldn't have escaped his attention that the budgets of his own efforts would have been splurged within the first minute of *Died*'s title credits.

It's gimmicky enough to give an unpublished Wood screenplay comparatively slick production values 40 years after the fact (although the film itself appears to be set in the 50s) without also having to turn it into a silent movie, albeit one with music, sound effects, a faux-roadshow medical voice-over, and a few unintelligible exclamations from the cast. With the loss of not only the terrible dialogue but also the desperate production values that made Wood's films enjoyable, *Died* seems to miss the point before it even begins. It works somewhat as a swan song to the man with such trademarks as cemeteries, transvestism, tabloid newspaper headlines and montages of stock footage, all treated as in-jokes.

Two of the slyest occur when a car crash is shown offscreen even though it's clear the budget would have allowed for it to be shown (cf *Plan 9*), and when a stripper performs for an obviously empty room with stock footage of an audience spliced in (cf *Jail Bait*: even more amusingly, the audience appears to be made up of teenagers watching something like a basketball game). It's also funny when the film shows black-and-white flashbacks presented in the type of cheap sets that Wood himself would have had to improvise back in his film-making days.

The plot, for what it is, follows a cheap crook played by Billy Zane as he takes it on the lam, steals some money, loses it, and then tries to track it down. Zane is vulnerable to loud noises (although it doesn't stop him firing a gun a few times), a condition that conveniently provides an excuse for him not to speak aloud without tipping off that Wood may have intended his script for a silent film because it would have been cheaper that way. At a running time longer than Wood's own efforts (*Plan 9* peaked at 79 minutes), it's unlikely that the screenplay was originally intended to run over the 70 minute mark, and any novelty value *Died* might have had is well worn through before long. Playing spot-the-cameo may help keep your interest, and *Died* has a collection of cult performers that would make John Waters envious – at the tip of the iceberg you'll find Eartha Kitt, Ron Perlman, Tippi Hendren, Christina Ricci, Sandra Bernhard, Bud Cort, Karen Black and Wood regular Vampira. The producers realized that a modern-day silent film would play better as a comedy than a drama, but *Died* is well short of screen comics – in fact most of the cast are serious actors, which works better anyway, as seeing straight players showing up on set for a day's work reminds us that the whole thing is meant to be taken as a bit of a lark. *I Woke Up Early the Day I Died* is watchable once; its soundtrack of diverse tunes is listenable twice. You can't escape the irony that if Wood had been alive in 1998 this script would have never gotten on to a producer's desk.

THE INCREDIBLY STRANGE CREATURES WHO STOPPED LIVING AND BECAME MIXED-UP ZOMBIES (1963) 82m. This Poverty Row flick must have been a nightmare for marquee titlers when it was first released. It's worth seeing as a conversation piece, and worth remembering if you're ever forced into a session of charades. Like *Killer Nun; Billy the Kid vs Dracula; Heads You Die, Tails I Kill You;* and *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*; (which at least features a ten-year old Pia Zadora with her face painted green) this is a film you see only for its title – a marketing tradition which video-schlock producers Troma seem to have adopted as their key selling point. Actually, this one isn't as bad as you might think. It's not that great, either. Three teenagers (one of them played by the film's 24-year-old director Ray Dennis Steckler) visit a fortune teller at a fairground and become involved in her murderous plans. It's a simple enough plot and would take up only half of the film's running time if it wasn't padded out with musical numbers. It's unusual that Steckler throws in so many songs (there is one good pop ballad, 'Someone That's Not You') because he's obviously more at home with action sequences – look at the way he handles the murder scenes, for instance. They're at least better than the dance numbers. The choreography in this film looks like it was done by two twelve-year old girls who learned their craft by dancing in front of the TV set.

Creatures also looks better than many other indie productions of the time as far as costumes and sets are concerned (i.e. it actually has costumes and sets). It was photographed by Vilmos Zsigmond, of all people, whose cinematography and co-ordinated primary colors help lift the film out of the shoddy, gimcrack appearance of most Z-grade cinema. To help make his film look less cheap, Steckler emphasises the tackiness of the production. He exploits his low budget by setting his story in tawdry dives, carnies, and strip shows, where we expect everything to look cheap anyway. He also manages to make a monster movie without monsters – although when it was first shown, people in rubber masks ran through the aisles at a key point in the screening. The story's definition of 'zombies' is technically correct – human beings that have become automatons (in this case, by hypnosis) that in turn are labelled 'monsters' the moment they are disfigured (by acid). *Creatures* isn't as much fun as the title suggests, but is worth seeing as a curio of fringe

cinema. Its finale on the beach is reminiscent of film noir B-movies.

INSERTS (1974) 117m. First-time writer-director John Byrum probably hoped the frank sexual content of his debut would get a lot of attention and a box-office draw. Instead it got him an X rating, and hardly anyone saw it. There's lots of nudity (Veronica Cartwright and Jessica Harper give bold performances) and a deliberately silly sex scene, which may have raised an eyebrow or two in the mid-70s, but even without its skin *Inserts*' subject matter and use of four-letter words would have earned an X regardless.

Byrum opens his movie with a small audience watching a 16mm projection of a cheap, black and white porno loop and then flashes back to reveal the people, story and process behind its making. Its director, as played by Richard Dreyfuss, is a former Hollywood up-and-comer (note to self: no more puns) known as Boy Wonder, who now spends his time sequestered in his home making porno quickies between hitting the bottle and walking about in his robe. It's pretty obvious that the impotent Dreyfuss is doing the old 'camera as penis substitute' bit as he straddles and circles his performers invasively with his lens, less obvious if Dreyfuss' constant drinking is a convenient mask to provide an excuse for his alleged impotency. I first figured the movie was set in the early 1930s in order for Byrum to add a classy veneer to what could have otherwise been exploitative and sleazy, or to perhaps throw a new twist on the usual affection for the 20s-30s that cinema-goers were accustomed to (yes, they did make pornography back in the silent days). But now I think of Dreyfuss having to manually crank his camera before he goes into action, and how it must inevitably (and often prematurely) wind out, and wonder if this prop was also a motivation for the period setting. The idea of Dreyfuss being an extension of his camera may not only be physical but also mental – we know that he has no neighbors because the surrounding houses are being demolished, and that the noise we hear swell up on the soundtrack now and then could be jackhammers, but it may also be the whirring of a camera inside his head, maddening him in times of stress or doubt.

Inserts comes across less like a film than a stage play written as a film. There is only one set and a handful of characters, whose entrances make them appear as if they've been waiting in the wings. The mantric dialogue gives everyone catchphrases and selective words that keep surfacing repeatedly: noodle; insane asylum; freeway; the meat; rope to rise; the new kid (at one point a dialogue exchange is repeated with different characters). The same applies to the names of the characters themselves, who are generally referred to by titles – Wonder Boy, Wonder Dog, Big Mac, Miss Cake. If the use of these devices is meant to draw attention to the staginess of the production, then it's a useful strategy to defend the staginess of the performances – rising star Bob Hoskins plays it big, and Dreyfuss in particular appears to enjoy treading the boards. The second half of the film is essentially a two-character piece which becomes enthralling, as the sexual politicking of who is directing who begins to change hands. Byrum's own direction doesn't call attention to itself (even though it might be tempting to film the story of a genius film maker in an innovative, obtrusive manner) and lets the performances and dialogue dictate his setups. Given that audiences didn't have the patience for the film's theatricality, he may have considered refashioning his story as a stage play after all.

INTERNATIONAL GUERRILLAS (1990) 167m. The only way you'll see this all-singing, all-action, all-rabid Pakistani absurdity is through grey market video, which is just as well because the idea of sitting through it for nearly three hours in a cinema is unthinkable. When UK author Salman Rushdie published his novel 'The Satanic Verses' in 1988, the Ayatollah of Iran took offense at its depiction of Mohammed and issued an open bounty on Rushdie's head, forcing the author into seclusion. After a failed assassination attempt by a lone extremist the following year, enterprising Pakistani film producers figured they could give the public what they wanted, and make a bit of cash on the side, by fictionalizing an account of Rushdie's pursuit, capture and execution. It seemed, as in the case of much Pakistani cinema, or 'Lollywood' movies, that *International Guerrillas* was unlikely to ever be seen by western audiences, but the inclusion of Rushdie as a character

gave it a leg-up into the bootleg market, and to the embarrassment of Pakistan's film culture, found an audience of schlock aficionados.

You'd have to be a diehard aficionado to tackle *Guerrillas* in one sitting: it takes nearly an hour before the opening credits appear to announce the central characters as the guerrillas of the title. By this time they've already had practice beating up a few bad guys (though everybody would be easier to tell apart if they didn't all wear the same mustache) and ready to do battle armed only with their list of Salman Rushdie insults, three Batman disguises, and a direct line to Mohammed for divine intervention; to wit, a flying Koran that fires lightning bolts. The next hour and a half is a shambles of various chases and shootouts until the inevitable showdown with Rushdie on his private island fortress. This finale contains a Pythonesque singalong which, even with half of the cast chained to crosses, doesn't seem any less absurd than the five previous musical numbers performed by sexily-gyrating young girls (I'm sure The Prophet would have approved) who insistently sing about how attractive they are. It should be conceded that the two heroines in the film are easy on the eye but with names like 'Dolly' and 'Shagutta', they sound like they would have been better off in a Pakistani Austin Powers movie.

As in India's 'masala' films, *Guerrillas* pulls out all the stops to create a mixture of adventure, romance, comedy, espionage, musical interludes, and Rushdie being blown up. The end result looks like it was edited on steroids – EVERY character gets a reaction shot or a smash zoom whenever anything happens, and you'll lose count of how many times the director includes a close-up of someone's feet landing on the ground. You'll laugh at how awful the film is at first, but find it difficult to keep it up before halfway through. Stick with it though – by the final act, the film has gone so far over the top that it is parodying itself, and among the histrionic emoting you'll get such choice lines as "We'll mutilate your evil face so bad that even Satan won't recognize you!". 20th-century architecture may have argued that less is more, but *Guerrillas* decisively demonstrates that more is less. Characters deliver jingoistic diatribes at every opportunity and the frustratingly dramatic background music never stops. Rushdie himself is portrayed as a James Bond supervillain whose glasses are always poised on the bridge of his nose, all the better to facilitate evil leering, all of which must have been much to the bemusement of the real Rushdie, who in any other film would been disturbed to see himself assassinated in effigy. Instead, he found *Guerrillas* so far removed from reality that he couldn't see any harm in allowing it to be screened in the UK. It would be unfair to assume all Pakistani films are as bad as this one, but if this is the sort of thing that's expected to garner big box-office receipts in their cinemas then it doesn't provide an incentive to seek out others.

ISLE OF FANTASY (1985) 85m. 85 minutes? I don't believe it. But that's the only running time I can find available for this film. This witless comedy seems a lot longer than 85 minutes. And I should know. I've seen it four times, and counting.

Right off the bat, it should be established that I am not using my quadruple viewing record as a recommendation of any sort. I am singling this film out not for reasons of merit, but for use as an example. That *Isle of Fantasy* should be my title of choice comes about only circumstantially, in that I was forced to watch it four times on a bus during the course of some years traveling through China. I'd already lost count of the number of mostly unendurable movies inflicted upon me on such journeys before I was introduced to Raymond Wong's brainchild, but this is the one that will always spring to my mind whenever the words 'movies' and 'China' are mentioned together (it used to be *Raise the Red Lantern*, but those were purer times). Why this 20-year old movie kept reappearing during these bus rides is beyond me, but it may be that the novelty of seeing a Westerner riding the mainland routes prompted the proprietors to slap on the only English-subtitled movie they had, irrespective of its age.

Let's run through the basics. "Isle of Fantasy". Well, that sounds promising, if derivative, and classier than "Island of Fantasy" which is, you know, tacky. "One guy and a bunch of cute girls marooned on a tropical island". Sounds even better. "Hong Kong comedy". Oh-oh. Cue sound of balloon rapidly deflating. For those unfamiliar with Asian comedy, the humour of

the genre is usually played very broadly and is dependent more on action than words, incorporating a regimen of shouting, slapping, mugging, double-takes and pratfalls. You can bet there'll be a lot of gender conflict, and at some point a man will be hit on the head by a woman's purse, or kicked in the shins, or both. If, in the case of *Isle*, there's a man and seven women, and the man happens to be Raymond Wong....well, do the math.

You have to admire Wong, a former comedian-turned-producer, who co-founded the Cinema City production studio and was responsible for giving a number of appealing Hong Kong actresses their break in film. *Isle of Fantasy* is notable for at least one thing, in that it brings together his 'Happy Troupe' trio (Charine Chan, May Lo, Fennie Yuen) with Cinema City regulars Loletta Lee (before she made a career out of Category III erotica), Bonnie Law and Ann Bridgewater. Clearly, this is a film for fans of the studio and its stock company, or Hong Kong cinema in general.

Here follows a synopsis, which I offer only because I want you to know exactly what I had to sit through....four times. After a brief opening scene that establishes Wong as the fall guy, the title credits roll over scenes at an airport check-in desk while an instrumental version of 'Jingle Bells' bops along innocuously on the soundtrack. So far, so cheap. Wong plays a salesman of rubber novelties (unfortunately not the kind of novelties that would lend any credence to the film's title) who ends up on a flight with a noticeably mature troupe of Girl Scouts on their way to a competition in London. Adding up the story elements so far we have: Title credit 'Isle of Fantasy' + Plane Trip Abroad + Bevy of Attractive Girls. Even if you know nothing about the story at this point you don't have to be Dalton Trumbo to figure out the direction the script is heading, and given the indication of *Isle*'s budget thus far you will likely be thinking "there is no way they're actually going to show a plane crash in this movie", and you'd be right, the dramatic event itself being delivered through the expedient of shaky-cam and much ado in the passenger's cabin. After being washed up on a deserted tropical island with nary a scratch, and conveniently being the only people to escape the attention of the rescue boat, the girls decide to make the best of things and set up camp. The troupe's preliminary task is to sing the first of the movie's handful of songs about how peachy-keen everyone and everything is, scoring an 'Up With People' on the puke-o-meter, and reminding us that the only thing worse than a Hong Kong comedy is a Hong Kong musical comedy. And I haven't yet mentioned the guy in a gorilla suit, who looks and acts exactly like a guy in a gorilla suit. In précis: the girls dress up in costumes that wash ashore in a trunk, have a banquet, sing again, slap Wong around a little. Plot twist introduced when gorilla turns out to be apron-wearing domestic of local hermit; surprise development has wounded undercover agent discovered on island and tended by girls; subsequent invasion by pirates and punch-up; everyone rescued by navy. Retrospectively, viewers will realize that the only 'fantasy' part of the story has been when the girls played dress-up. Obviously, sexual fantasy was never part of the game plan, since everyone remains chaste and the gorilla is the only one to cop a feel, but the girls reprise their chorus "This is the Isle of Fantasy!" nonetheless and the credits roll over the cast cheerfully waving their passports at the camera in the airport as they embark upon their tropical vacation. Er, film shoot.

Nuts. And I didn't get to mention that one of the girls becomes traumatized by the plane crash and meows like a cat for half of the movie.

Well, this all sounds like wacky fun, but of course it isn't, advocating the existence of a cinema dictum that the wackier a film sounds in synopsis, the duller it is to watch. The humour, lazy and wholly predictable, appears to have been invented on the spot, as if reaching the destination and setting up the camera took priority over actually having a script. Director Michael Mak (whose best known feature is *Sex and Zen*) does everything by the numbers, only once half-heartedly attempting some Benny Hill-style gags that don't even reach the level of Benny Anthill. It's almost unbearable to watch. Bloody hell. Did I just call Michael Mak a "director"? Sample hi-jinks: Wong visits girls spearfishing in a lagoon. Sees girl spear a fish. Has a go himself. "He's not going to spear himself in the foot, is he?" you think. Of course he is. The first time I watched *Isle of Fantasy* the corny punchlines had me groaning "make it stop"

and “my brain hurts” for the duration. When the final credits made their overdue appearance I had nothing but resentment for the film. Two hours of my time wasted, when I could have been watching something else, or at least having a nap.

When the film appeared again on another trip my jaw dropped open and the phrase “Oh no...”, began circling in my head as I realized what the next two hours (I still can’t believe it’s 85 minutes) had in store. That said, it didn’t seem as insufferable the second time around because I already knew the story and was no longer irritably predicting the clichés or hanging on to the slender thread of hope that something fresh would turn up instead. The film’s unexpected third appearance, however, had gone beyond “Oh No” as a reaction and brought expletives into play, and despite attempts not to watch it (I was getting a crick in my neck from resolutely staring out of the bus window) I ended up digesting the film piecemeal. By the fourth viewing, I had admitted defeat. I didn’t watch it. I just stared at it. Surprisingly, it seemed more watchable, and when the end credits rolled I was less aggravated than usual. I came to accept that the movie had an ingenuous charm to it. It was still the same banal fare as it had always been, but like the sailors stranded on the isle of the lotus eaters, I found myself caring less as the time whiled away. And somehow....the characters had become more endearing.

As any soap opera devotee can tell you, familiarity does not necessarily breed contempt, but acts as an anodyne. Sometimes it’s nice not having to think about anything new. It’s nice to know exactly what you’re going to get. It’s nice to watch a film so cheerfully simple and unpretentious that it doesn’t care about criticism. We all fall victim to a cheesy movie or dumb TV show at some time, and excuse it as a ‘guilty pleasure’. I know that *Isle* is second-rate in every department and I’ll never think otherwise, but it’s also harmless. I actually like watching the cast having a good time making their movie on the island. I enjoy seeing them completely forget about their roles as characters whenever they sing directly to the camera. I like to see Wong shout “Wah!” when a javelin plants itself in the sand near his feet; or cute Loletta squealing at everything that alarms her; or the Scout Leader continually snapping at Wong and calling him a sex maniac; or Ann performing her martial arts moves and smarting about it afterwards.

To challenge the idea that viewers have control over what they watch, it should be remembered that films don’t change: we change. Either you can enjoy a movie the first time you see it but find it less interesting on the next viewing, or you can be disappointed on your initial viewing but find it better the second time around. Of course *Isle of Fantasy* falls into the second category...but whether or not you or I, or anybody else wants to put in the necessary hours is another thing altogether.

THE ITALIAN JOB (1969) 98m. An enduring cult favorite: it is best remembered for its unexpected ending and a robbery sequence featuring three Mini Coopers. Michael Caine is Charlie Croker, a small-time crook who sees his chance to make the big time by hijacking a bullion shipment in Turin. His plan is sponsored by English gentleman Mr Bridger (Noel Coward), a high-class criminal who lives the high life in a London prison. As protagonists, Caine and Coward couldn’t be more different, but between them they encompass the spectrum of all that is essentially English. Coward, who waves his hand like royalty, is accompanied throughout the film by a number of pro-British anthems (Rule Brittania, God Save the Queen, The British Grenadiers) that eventually culminate in a football chant from his fellow inmates; Caine, meanwhile, is a Jack-the-lad who hasn’t lost touch with people on the street. *The Italian Job*’s tongue-in-cheek patriotism (ostensibly the ‘real’ motive behind the robbery) paints a world where there is co-operation between the classes, between criminals and the law, between the common laborer and the educated professional, all united as a matter of national pride.

The film’s images of British criminals abroad – invading foreign turf, so to speak – is well complemented by location shooting in Italy, particularly the crowded Turin streets and the majestic alpine roads. The highlight, of course, is the robbery itself, in which three patriotically-colored Minis (which always drive in order of red, white, and blue) weave through plazas and rooftops in order to make their getaway. The original ending, as written, tied up loose ends with Caine’s girlfriend and the

Mafia (who simply drop out of the story in the final cut), but the substitute ending is more in keeping with the film's cavalier attitude. *The Italian Job* has humor, action, but surprisingly little suspense. Caine, who was enthusiastic about this project, is curiously flat and mannered – it's almost as if a Michael Caine impersonator had dubbed his voice. Peter Collinson, who seems to enjoy filming cars rolling down cliffs, directed from an original screenplay by Troy Kennedy Martin. Quincy Jones supplied the music – an odd choice! It's worth seeing in widescreen Panavision.

JABBERWOCKY (1977) 100m. It's taken some distance to view Terry Gilliam's solo directing debut with an unbiased eye. Audiences who were expecting a wacky, anarchic Monty Python production (the misleading advertising didn't help) were disappointed upon the film's release – they'd already seen medieval squalor in the comedy team's previous film, and here it was again, but this time well short of laughs, and Pythons. The casting of only one of the troupe (Michael Palin) had tipped off audiences that this wasn't going to be full-fledged Monty Python fare and also planted suspicions that the film wasn't 'good enough' to attract involvement of the whole group. Without his fellow regulars to provide their customarily barbed interplay, Palin is left with a fairly straight role, in which his character travels from the country to the city, meets all manner of eccentrics, and finds himself in a number of different scrapes, all the while being told of an unseen monster that is terrorizing the villages nearby. Even though Palin has an engaging presence we don't really care what he does or what happens to him during his misadventures – he doesn't act so much as react, and it's not even of any concern to us that he doesn't realize he gets a 'happy ending' in the films' final frames.

It's plain that by casting many comedians familiar to British audiences Gilliam was intending to make a humorous film. The only problem is that despite its silly tone it doesn't *look* funny. Gilliam shoots *Jabberwocky* as if it were a European art film; it's gorgeous to look at in places – many scenes with single-source onscreen lighting are like oil paintings, and the authentic locations have presence – but the cast looks like they wandered in from a Pasolini movie, the framing is claustrophobic, and there's way too much smoke. There are absurd moments scattered throughout the story, but they come off as concessions to Python fans, with Gilliam more interested in a visceral approach to the story. Another problem with *Jabberwocky* is the viewer assumption that if it isn't going to be a Python comedy then it would at least fall back to being a monster movie. There is a pre-credits attack, but the beast itself doesn't appear until the final reel, and everything inbetween is filler. For what Gilliam is trying to do with *Jabberwocky*, the monster is irrelevant and could have easily been gotten rid of in deference to his portrayal of medieval life. Unfortunately this setting is used as an excuse for frequent toilet humor (literally), which is a step down from the wit and satire that Gilliam, Palin, and their contemporaries are better known for.

Putting aside the specious connection to Lewis Carroll's poem 'Jabberwocky', there was no real need for the two Pythons to visit the Dark Ages a second time. It appears that Gilliam still had an itch to scratch after getting the directing bug from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and felt that *Grail*'s dramatic locations and visual backdrops had been pushed aside by its flippant style. Rather like *Jabberwocky*'s hero, Gilliam's solo outing is more of a reaction than an action, but perhaps a necessary one for him to make in order to hone his craft and reposition himself as a film-maker with a vision. It's a transitory work, simultaneously a nod goodbye to his TV roots and an indication of newer directions to come. Now that Gilliam has well established himself in the canon of cinema, *Jabberwocky* has become an interesting work to revisit, and one in which we can see his singular talents starting off at the level of grass roots. And straw. And mud. And dust…

JAPAN SINKS (1973) 143m. Shortly before Hollywood made an industry out of 'disaster

movies', which jeopardized celebrity casts in airliners, ships, burning buildings, and earthquakes, Japan had already settled for nothing less than the destruction of their entire country. Produced by Toho Studios, which had been warming up for years by knocking down cities with a lineup of prehistoric monsters such as Rodan and Mothra, *Nippon Chinbotsu (Japan Sinks)* was, at the time, one of the most expensive productions filmed in Japan. It's certainly a much more mature and accomplished achievement than some viewers may have expected from Toho, given their genre history, but Western audiences only ever saw a truncated version (called, rather ridiculously, *Tidal Wave*) marketed by Roger Corman's New World Studios, which edited the film with a hacksaw and added new scenes featuring Lorne Greene (in the same way that Raymond Burr had been inserted into Toho's original *Godzilla* many years earlier). This version of the film opened to terrible reviews in the U.S. and, fittingly, sank without a trace. But the damage had already been done, and *Japan Sinks* never did resurface abroad in its original 143-minute cut. From a marketing perspective, the likelihood of a Western re-release has probably now been made redundant by Toho's own 2006 remake *Nihon Chinbotsu*.

It's not hard to guess what was cut out for the U.S. release: there is a lot of talk in this movie, and most of it is technical. For the first hour, scientists investigate abnormalities in the Earth's crust, gathering data, formulating projections, and discussing strategies (one animated simulation of the impending disaster is somewhat priapic in appearance, carrying with it the unintentional signifier that Japan is screwed). We've been well primed for a major destruction sequence by the time the first earthquake hits, and there are some effective scenes in the ten minutes of mayhem that follows, but unfortunately there are some also some absurdly cheap looking special effects (toy cars falling off a bridge, a toy helicopter dropping to the ground) that look all the shoddier projected in widescreen. Even by the standard of effects in 1973, and the audience expectations of such, I still can't believe that someone in the studio didn't make the decision to judiciously remove a few minutes before the film's release. With the advances of CGI in 2006, the remake was able to show us, in terrifying clarity, an entire nation sinking into the sea; with the original film we're presented with model cities burning in normal-size flames, and model mountains being sloshed with a bucket of muddy water.

I'm a big fan of visual effects from all eras of cinema, and I'm certainly not one to belittle a film simply because its effects were generated from a simpler state of the art. It's easy to enjoy watching the Toho monsters knock down buildings and swat aside trains and planes because the stories are inherently silly and the effects are just part of the overall silliness. But in *Japan Sinks* it's different. This film strives for realism, and because it invests so much research into its premise and raises ethical questions on a scale that makes the story seem merely an overture to an epic saga, it takes only a few seconds of sub-par effects to deflate its intentions. The 2006 version is able to make up this FX shortfall with jaw-dropping visuals that can only be appreciated on a cinema screen, but unfortunately that's about all it has going for it, as its screenplay is hopelessly clichéd. You want to see a couple running towards each other in slow motion while a pop song suddenly bursts onto the soundtrack and the camera spins around them? How about a cute little girl who is in peril so often that it appears the country is disintegrating purely as a personal grudge against her? Or a movie that begins *and* ends with a rope-swinging rescue straight out of a Tarzan movie? And, unlike the novel or earlier film, the characters in 2006 decide they're not going to lie down quietly and let the Earth's tectonic plates just push them around. Without this level of FX/CGI technology in 1973, the producers of the original *Japan Sinks* were forced to concentrate on the sociological, political, and geographical elements of the story, and ended up with the better script.

Director Shiro Moritani knows how to use his widescreen frame, and *Japan Sinks* looks great right from the opening montage, which positions the story specifically in Japan, (a shinkansen speeds past Mt Fuji in the opening shot, which is about as iconic as you can get – and rather cheekily is copied exactly in the 2006 remake's own opening montage) and impresses upon us that its four islands are home to over 100 million people. Already the movie is

ramping up our expectations for a level of FX which it can't possibly deliver, so it's better to think of *Japan Sinks* as less of an action film and more of a treatise on the Japanese psyche. Perhaps after dealing in a more metaphorical way (e.g. Godzilla) with the three years of apocalyptic firebombing and final nuclear holocaust at the end of World War II, Toho saw *Japan Sinks* as their final catharsis. There's imagery of ash-covered bodies and falling shards of glass disturbingly evocative of the nuclear attacks, and the shots of citizens fleeing through burning buildings could have been taken directly from the firebombing massacre. However there is no enemy, monster, or villain in this film, let alone war. The heroes are simply people doing their jobs – firefighters, politicians, scientists, and academics. There is a love interest in the story, of course, but this is handled much more realistically than you would expect and doesn't take up much screen time. Neither is there a noble sacrifice nor sentimental reunion/departure at the end. The film's wordless final shots – of two trains in two different countries – may not leave you satisfied, but in light of everything that is happened before, it is the most likely conclusion. And despite all the destruction by volcanoes, earthquakes, infernos, and tsunami that has been thrown up on the screen by the film's end, there appears to be even worse to come: given the insular nature of Japan, which has strict immigration laws and maintains a fairly homogeneous culture, the extinction of their country would probably be a less traumatic event for the Japanese than the thought of having to integrate themselves into foreign societies. Is it any surprise that the characters in 2006 wanted to fight back?

THE JERK (1979) 94m. On the basis of his stage act, you wouldn't think that comedian Steve Martin would have been a likely candidate for a successful movie career. Certainly, his 'wild and crazy guy' persona wouldn't have translated as a character for the screen easily, but his earlier films – *The Jerk, Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid,* and *The Man With Two Brains* – were offbeat enough to meet him halfway. *The Jerk*, his feature debut, is probably the most 'fast and loose' of these, although unlike the other early Martin films, it is driven by character, not concept. Martin plays Navin, not exactly a jerk (he only refers to himself as such in one scene) but a hopelessly naïve and good-natured journeyman who leaves his foster parents in search of fame and fortune.

Despite its shortcomings, *The Jerk* is a good example of how the big screen welcomes some comedians much more easily than others. How many times have we seen a great standup act or *Saturday Night Live* performer flop on film? Call it charisma or communication, Martin still has it. We like him after only a few minutes of *The Jerk*'s running time, without really knowing much about his character. An intelligent and diversely-talented performer (get hold of a copy of his live act, if you can), he never once positions himself against his cinema audience – that is, he neither patronizes them ('Look how clever I am') or plays for sympathy ('Connect with me, I'm vulnerable'). *The Jerk* is uneven and episodic but as Navin, Martin is consistent throughout. He's always optimistic and enthusiastic: gushing about the kind of improvements he can make in a men's washroom, discovering his name in the phone book for the first time, and (in a brief scene I find hilarious) getting excited about an Irving Berlin tune he hears on the radio. It's odd that co-writer Martin puts his character in a carnival for much of the film's running time and doesn't exploit the opportunity to demonstrate his physical dexterity (he does have one uncredited 'act' but to say more would spoil it).

One of the things that I find makes this film worth a second or even third viewing is that the scenes which made me laugh on my first viewing aren't usually the same ones that amuse me on repeat screenings. I still like the wackiness, but now I also appreciate the sweet, daffy moments (Martin and co-star Bernadette Peters singing 'You Belong To Me') and off-the-wall lines ("For only fifty cents I'll guess your height, weight and sex! Step right up!"). Martin and Peters are great together, which is probably why they were reunited for Martin's next film, the very different *Pennies From Heaven*. As time went on they would both move into more conventional films – fortunately we have *The Jerk* as a cinematic time capsule for the period where, like the idealistic Navin, Martin himself was a little wild and crazy and on the road to fame and fortune.

J-MEN FOREVER (1979) 73m. Media hijacking works best in small doses, which is why this comedy by the Firesign Theater's Phil Proctor and Peter Bergman may seem too long even at 73 minutes. It's also a pretty cheap way to make a movie – namely, by pillaging footage from half a dozen or so Saturday Serials from the 40s, replacing their soundtracks with new dubbed dialogue, and adding ten minutes of extra footage to help knit the diverse characters and settings together.

The J-Men (presumably a subdivision of 'G-Men') are agents in pursuit of the Lightning Bug, a villain from the Moon who wants to destroy Earth by bombarding it with Rock'n'Roll and drugs, in that order. I can think of worse ways to go. It's an amusing premise for the film because Rock'n'Roll was perceived as a threat to society in the 50s, the decade in which the teenager was born, and studios were cashing in on the youth market (who may have been Misunderstood, but still had Money) with films like *Rock Around the Clock* and *Don't Knock the Rock*. Meanwhile, exploitation film-makers were milking the drug scene with efforts like *Wild Youth* and *The Cool and the Crazy*. *J-Men*'s laughs initially come from seeing all kinds of B-Movie havoc edited to rock music, with the Bug providing a DJ commentary that sounds like the more lycanthropic side of Wolfman Jack, but the music itself has an ersatz feel. Rock'n'roll is certainly an alternative to the status quo of Lawrence Welk, Mantovani, Kaempfert, et. al. that the Bug wants to destroy, so it's a shame the film-makers didn't have the budget to get some truly great standards into the movie (it's funny to hear Captain Marvel's "Shazam!" command renamed to "Sh-boom", even if it's only for a couple of seconds). In the end, *J-Men* doesn't last the distance on musical anachronisms alone, and you might suspect that the dubbed dialogue could have been funnier if handed over to other writers (it's pretty dumb when Proctor and Bergman resort to puns, and a lot of the physical gags in the new footage are just embarrassing). Probably the funniest scene in the movie occurs when the characters are inactive and silent, as a group of sober officials listen to a rock and roll record given a spin on the turntable. It's also amusing to see one of the characters recognize Leonard Nimoy in a clip from *Zombies of the Stratosphere*.

J-Men's alternative title 'The Day the Earth Got Stoned' (which is how I first saw it billed at a film festival), may have been designed to cash in on the humor of Cheech and Chong, whose drug-addled characters were popular at the time, but the film is less 70s 'stoner humor' than a wink at the movies and audiences of the 50s. The final montage is a tribute, of sorts, to the most fraudulent element of the matinee serials – the famous cliffhanger endings which saw the hero 'killed' to entice moviegoers to return for the next instalments. But maybe the film-makers didn't need to go to too much effort with their re-edited storyline. I've seen *Rader Men from the Moon* played as a serial over a period of months at a rep cinema, and it got plenty of laughs from the audience without any help from the Firesign troupe.

JONATHAN LIVINGSTON SEAGULL (1973) 114m. Nobody would have imagined Richard Bach's novella 'Jonathan Livingston Seagull' as a movie, but only three years after its publication film-maker Hall Bartlett brought it to the screen and instantly divided audiences in two. It's both adored and derided, largely depending on your view of Bach's metaphysics and Neil Diamond's music. The first half hour of the film is breathtaking, filling the screen with beautifully photographed images of seagulls in flight, turbulent oceans, and grand natural vistas. It's also the part of the film with the least talking – not that I have anything against seagulls talking in voice-over if they're the only characters in the story, but at the moment Jonathan and his cronies start opening their beaks the film starts on a slippery slide downhill. Because the story is simple and has animals for characters, it instantly faces the pitfalls of allegory/analogy/metaphor. Jonathan wants to break free of the restrictions of his life and reach new heights, figuratively and literally. His individualism is frowned upon and he is exiled from gull society. After a physical and spiritual odyssey he becomes a transcendentalist Christ figure who returns to his flock to spread the word (everybody's heard about the bird, the bird is the word) by which time the movie has become 20 minutes too long.

Assuming that viewers are going to buy into the idea of talking seagulls from the outset, the faults of *Seagull* lie in its execution and not its concept. I don't know how anyone else would imagine the speaking voice of a seagull but the dubbing in the film just doesn't seem to fit. Jonathan himself doesn't have a lot of emotional range even though he experiences everything from near-death to euphoria, but then again a seagull shouldn't have any emotional range to begin with – consider the difficulty Bartlett and his editor must have had cutting dialogue to the largely expressionless faces of gulls standing about on rocks or piles of garbage. Bartlett's background as a documentary film-maker is an advantage for a film that doesn't require any actors but a liability when it comes to adapting Bach's fiction (the author sued after he saw the finished result). The script could have said more simply by saying less - this is one movie where viewers will instantly think "I would have cut that line" on numerous occasions. It would be hard enough having human characters deliver some of the dime-store philosophy in this film but it's even harder to swallow when voiced by birds. The film bogs down mightily once it gets mystical and Bartlett's mistake is to let the characters explain too much when images alone would suffice.

Audiences proved that they would watch a feature-length movie of birds in flight when the 2001 documentary *Winged Migration* became a hit, and *Seagull* is best enjoyed on a similar angle while putting aside its narrative distractions – notice that when Jonathan leaves the flock and has no-one to converse with that Bartlett introduces footage of other animals and keeps changing the landscapes. It's anyone's guess how many different 'Jonathans' were used to represent the same character but there must have been a lot of gulls confused about why they were deposited alone in the middle of locations like deserts, flotsam, snowy mountains, forests and even Death Valley. *Seagull* is a lot more watchable on a big screen and it does help to see it with a friendly audience (when I saw a retrospective screening, the girl behind me started shrieking with laughter at the first spoken word and ran out moments later, never to return – her date didn't follow her!). From a technical viewpoint, Bartlett's film is an ambitious accomplishment, and it's certainly the only talking seagull movie in the world with a time-capsule Neil Diamond soundtrack (his fans must love this film). It is likely, however, that the book could be read in less time than it would take to watch the movie.

JUGGERNAUT (1974) 110m. Produced and released before the wave of 70s 'disaster movies', Richard Lester's *Juggernaut* had the benefit of selling itself as a legitimate thriller and not just as another passengers-in-peril knockoff. It also seemed to rewrite the conventions of disaster pics before they even began. While boasting the customary all-star cast of such films, *Juggernaut*'s ensemble could not only act a lot better (Richard Harris, Anthony Hopkins, David Hemmings, Ian Holm) but were given pivotal roles in the action rather than being relegated to the 'celebrity passenger' lineup requisite to the genre. Being an A-list star doesn't guarantee having the best role, however: Lester regular Roy Kinnear, always included in his films for comic relief, seems to have more screen time and presence in a supporting role than ship's captain Omar Sharif, who divides his time between fretting about his ship and dealing with an irrelevant romantic subplot with Shirley Knight, who has even less to do in her function of spouting philosophical thoughts for the captain to brood over.

It's natural to assume that the name 'Juggernaut' refers to the ocean liner providing the film's setting, but instead it is the code name of a terrorist-extortionist who has planted time bombs at strategic points on board the huge ship which will explode if he is not paid half a million pounds. Harris plays a disposal expert assigned to disable the bombs before the deadline, while Hopkins tries to track down the identity of the bomber back on dry land. Hitchcock was in two minds about his own theory that if you show a ticking bomb, then you'd better blow something up with it, and in *Juggernaut* there are seven of them, leaving the will-it-or-won't-it element wide open. Despite the large scale shots and sea and various stunts, it's the extreme close-ups of Harris at work that become more gripping, as he negotiates a series of triggers, false trails and booby traps while his team simultaneously works on the other devices. The film's final moments rest on the now-standard

situation of having the hero deciding whether to cut the red or the blue wire, but is given such attention here that you have to wonder whether the cliche began with this film. The story also keeps the circumstances of Harris' involvement real – he's no action hero that's going to do the impossible and defeat the villain, and at one point stops working on the bombs to offer a solution that would be too practical for other action movies: "He's not a greedy man. Pay him the money."

Lester, who is best known for his absurdist comedies, is a rare director who adapts easily to all genres, including historical drama, fantasy, musical and western. He makes the switch to thriller mode just as easily. He's also a director who likes to work on location, and the tilting horizons and heaving seas in *Juggernaut* give the movie the hard, no-frills documentary look that he seems to prefer (the absence of music throughout the film also contributes this effect). I don't know how long the cast and crew were stuck on board ship, but I get the feeling that Hopkins and Holms were grateful that all their scenes were landlocked.

KELLY'S HEROES (1970) 149m. A mostly successful hybrid of two genres, the war movie and caper film, which was popular with audiences upon its release. Clint Eastwood is topbilled as a former lieutenant (he was busted down when the army needed a scapegoat) fighting for the liberation of France in WWII. He hits upon the idea of robbing a bank behind enemy lines while the country is in turmoil. Eventually Telly Savalas and the rest of his platoon, along with several outsiders, also get involved in the plan.

The tone and feel of the film on one hand portrays the chaos of war as a giant shoot-em-up adventure playground, but on the other as a brutal and unheroic campaign of destruction. Director Brian G. Hutton and writer Troy Kennedy Martin are intent on blurring the line; to show that in ever-changing battle frontiers there can only be ambiguity. Most ambiguous of all is that these unclear notions of heroism and crime are being packaged as escapist, mainstream entertainment. Eastwood is a complete cipher – he may as well be a carbon copy of the same character he played for Hutton in the previous year's *Where Eagles Dare* – leaving the more overt roles to players like the cosmically enlightened Donald Sutherland or hustling entrepreneur Don Rickles. Also, it's hard to reconcile the film's title with its events – since when do mercenaries become classed as heroes? That their actions are illegal are confirmed by Rickles, who gloats that their caper is "the perfect crime". Of course, it could be the film-makers' contention that there are no heroes in war, and that the only valor is getting out alive. Scenes of Kelly (coolly played by Eastwood) and his platoon energetically mowing down German infantrymen become nothing more than just another part of the adventure. The biggest irony – and it is what 'validates' Eastwood's actions – is that the platoon unknowingly become heroes anyway, or at least as gung-ho general Colt (Carroll O'Conner, in an amusing role) defines the term.

The film's finale is drawn out but comes at the end of much action, humor, and brisk performances by the cast. Fortunately, Hutton elects to keep *Kelly's Heroes* light (listen to that theme tune, for example) and doesn't turn it into heavy-handed antiwar bloodletting. For this reason, it becomes one of those unusual things – a war adventure that isn't interested in its own message.

THE KILLER SHREWS (1959) 69m. *Night of the Living Dead* was a standout horror movie of its time, and the inspiration for its depiction of characters under siege could be attributed in turn to the finale of *The Birds*, the novel 'I Am Legend', or even those Westerns in which characters find themselves fighting off hostiles while holed up in cavalry forts. But ten years before Romero made his celebrated horror pic there was this low-budget B-picture, produced by one of its stars, Ken Curtis (who, interestingly, does not play the hero), which could also have served as inspiration had it been more widely known. Curtis, who played Festus on the TV series *Gunsmoke*, collaborated with one of the

show's writers, Jay Simms, to bring *The Killer Shrews* to the screen. They'd obviously intended to try their hand at a horror film, but unfortunately, it's best known today for its supposed camp value. The film's pre-credit voiceover is laughable, and the opening lines of dialogue not much better, but I don't think it deserves its much-maligned reputation. After its shaky start it becomes a decent, economical piece of film-making. Curtis' budget obviously failed to provide him with convincing monsters, but a realistic horde of vicious, oversized shrews would have been beyond the means of any studio in 1959. The film-makers tried to get around this problem by switching between model heads (for close-ups) and dogs hidden under costumes (for long shots), and it's this presentation of the 'killer' shrews that earns the film ridicule from viewers today. Personally, I don't see much difference between a dog in a costume or a man in a costume, and for that reason the shrews shouldn't come across any more hokey than the rubber suits of other 50s horror classics like *The Thing* or *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

The 'siege' element of the story is twofold: firstly, its seven characters are trapped on an island that is being used for an overpopulation experiment (shrews are being bred to the point of self-extinction), and secondly, they are confined to an adobe house which is being weakened by the violent storm outside. I like the way *The Killer Shrews* overcomes its limitations by confining its events to one set, using sound effects (the constant wind), lighting, and editing to create atmosphere. The shrews get a fair share of screen time, but move quickly and are never clearly seen (director Ray Kellogg may have been taking a leaf out of Jacques Tourneur's book). I also find the motivation of the monsters this time around a lot more believable than most other horror pics. Unlike other 50s creatures, which seemed intent only in stealing the hero's girlfriend or rampaging around and lowering property values, the shrews are driven by starvation – their attempts to bite or claw their way into the house are quite creepy, and there's even one good shock effect. There's also some great moments between Curtis and star James Best (who, like the characters in *Night of the Living Dead*, can't co-operate despite the menacing horrors outside), and a quirky escape plan. Watch it late at night with the lights out, and you may find it's not as bad as you've heard. I realize I'm probably sticking my neck out on this one, but I guess I've always stood up for the underdog, even when they're disguised as shrews

---

KING KONG (2005) 187m. Peter Jackson is in the company of an elite number of film-makers in the enviable position of making their childhood dreams come true. He loved Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings'; he made the movie of it. He loved *King Kong* as a child; he made his own version of it. And he can be seen entertaining these seemingly impossible fancies as far back as 1978, when as a teenager he submitted an 8mm film with a stop-motion animated monster for a television competition.

When I first heard of Jackson's plans for a *Kong* remake, three thoughts immediately came to my mind – 'Why the hell does he want to remake a classic?'; 'If he's lucky it won't seem quite as unnecessary as the 1976 remake', and 'Is he going to put giant spiders in it?'. The spiders are a piece of *Kong* lore. I know I'll never get to see David Lean's *Nostromo* or Kubrick's *Napoleon*, but there was always some slender hope that someone, somewhere might unearth a lost reel containing the legendary 'Spider Sequence', in which a good number of the movie's cast fall into a chasm and are killed by huge spiders. Legend goes that it was cut out of the original 1933 *Kong* after its premiere, reportedly because the audience freaked out so much that they couldn't concentrate on the scenes following. When it came time for the long-awaited DVD release of the 1933 *Kong*, Jackson and his team used existing storyboards and stills to recreate this sequence to the point that it looked like it could have been made back in the days of the original film (the time he spent faking vintage film footage for *Forgotten Silver* probably paid off here). Having made this bonus DVD feature a labor of love, it was unlikely that Jackson would have then repeated it in his own version – doubly so when he had already done his own Giant Spider scene in *Lord of the Rings* anyway.

Still, I was curious to see if anything would come of the spiders. The answer that Jackson responded with has got to be the most expensive in-joke in the history of cinema. The chasm is still in the new movie, but instead of spiders it is populated with

wetas, a turnabout that no doubt induced gagging and wry grins from audiences in New Zealand at the time of the film's premiere. For most folks outside the antipodes, the acronym WETA is simply the name of an NZ effects company. But as anyone actually living on those islands can tell you, the weta is the most loathed and dreaded of native wildlife. It's unfortunate for the weta that it is quite a large and fearsome-looking insect, and most people in NZ have a 'shriek first, kill later' reaction to them.

It's not only the wetas that Jackson has fun with, but also Skull Island's whole ecosystem of prehistoric monsters. I remember being surprised and delighted to see dinosaurs when I first watched the original *Kong* – I'd assumed the gorilla was the only creature in it – and I'm sure Jackson reveled in it, too. Back in pre-*Jurassic Park* days it was rare to see good dinosaur FX, and I think *Kong* was about only the second I'd seen after Harryhausen's work on *One Million Years BC*. Jackson had to wait about thirty years to give the dinosaur scenes in his imagination full vent on the screen, and the action scenes will undoubtedly win this movie many fans, but while 1933 audiences were amazed by the level of effects work in *Kong*, 21st century audiences expect the effects to be nothing less than amazing, and are harder to impress. The result is a new breed of film directors, or a new style of film directing, of which Jackson is at the forefront. As much as I enjoy and admire *Kong* and *Lord of the Rings*, I don't feel that CGI-era Jackson is a director as much as a choreographer, a logistician, a painter of digital images. For me, real directing comes from looking through a lens and capturing what is framed within it – obviously *Kong* and *Rings* are quantum leaps from Jackson's 1983 debut *Bad Taste*, yet it's that earlier film that I still treasure as a piece of highly-individual film-making craft. I'd even be tempted to trade *Kong* for a chance to see 'The Valley' if it came down to it.

So, in twenty-five words or less: Yes, *King Kong* is great, grand-scale movie-making – an old-fashioned adventure with action, spirit, and a lot of heart.

But no matter how marvelous *Kong* looks and feels, it will never beat the original. Jackson and his crew can be happy in the knowledge that their movie wasn't a misfire like Dino De Laurentis' 1976 remake. One reason the '76 movie failed was because it posed itself as a brassy improvement on the original (Location shooting! Widescreen! Bigger monkeys! Newer skyscrapers!). Jackson publicised his love of the original *Kong* long before his movie appeared, making it clear that he had no pretensions of updating or improving upon the original, but instead wanted to live out a childhood dream. The 2005 *Kong* can't be the revered milestone that the 1933 *Kong* was, and Jackson knows that, and that's why his film is actually good.

KING RAT (1965) 133m. Even those who don't like war movies are bound to enjoy George Segal's assured performance as Corporal King in this adaptation of James Clavell's novel, set in a Japanese-run POW camp in Singapore towards the close of WWII. Refreshingly, this film is not about escape, or attempted escape; as the prologue states, it is a story of existence within the camp itself. Opportunistic King enlists the services of British prisoner Peter Marlowe (James Fox) after learning that he can speak Malay. A bond forms between the two, although its worth is not revealed until the film's end, when we see their friendship more as a natural countermeasure against the unwelcome attention of Lt. Grey (Tom Courtenay), the camp's provost marshal. Grey is a strictly by-the-book one-man law enforcement operation who divides his time between maintaining order in the camp and staking out King's money-making scams, waiting to pounce on him at the first opportunity. He rightly believes in his own integrity but fails to recognize the same quality in the other, less disciplined, inmates of the camp. Grey can't see that each POW has their own way of dealing with their situation, or that his is to try to create reason out of chaos.

The camp struggles within a frail system of law and order: everyone demands justice, revenge, compensation, a deal. The Japanese seem just as caught up in the power game as everyone else – control becomes a shuffle of reports, reprimands, and reprisals. In this environment, a hustler like King is sure to thrive, just as any resourceful rat would. While the film refers to prisons within the prison (Grey's jail, the cages beneath the American barracks, the cell they "hire" to get some privacy), it

is the prison within themselves that confines the men most. It seems obvious in the case of the repressed provost marshal, the careworn, numbed surgeon, and the diversionary denial that several prisoners indulge in, but King is perhaps the most trapped of all. "Before this," he says of the war, "everybody had it made except me". For him, the end of the war is a more pressing concern than its continuation: he believes that the Japanese will kill all their prisoners before surrendering; Grey has vowed to get even with him when the war is over; and a liberating soldier intimates an investigation into his activities after the evacuation. King will no longer be king.

Its subject matter sounds depressing, but *King Rat* is actually quite funny in places (particularly the sequences about a makeshift school lesson and a secret dinner held for King's friends) and the dialogue crackles whenever Grey is at odds with King or Marlowe. Courtenay and Fox couldn't be better in their roles. Performances are first-rate all round, from John Mills and Denholm Elliott right down to bit parts like Leonard Rossiter. John Barry wrote the elegiac score; Bryan Forbes directed from his own screenplay.

THE KIRLIAN WITNESS (1978) 88m. A woman is found dead – apparently murdered – on a rooftop. Her sister (Nancy Snyder), unsatisfied with the official police findings, pursues inquiries of her own. Here's what makes the rest of this genre piece different: her key witness is a potted plant. It sounds like a joke, but the story handles its premise seriously. Aware of the importance of suspending the audience's disbelief, first-time writer/director Jonathon Sarno provides a skeptical husband (Joel Kolodner) to voice our own doubts about Snyder's investigation as it progresses. Does it make the story more believable if the central character is a woman? I'd say that it was definitely a conscious choice of the film-makers, although it suggests the underlying message that women are more receptive to a broader view of science and nature than men. Personally I don't see *The Kirlian Witness* reaching any conclusions about polygraphs, telepathy, or Kirlian photography as a forensic methodology: ultimately, the circumstances of Snyder's investigation can be boiled down to hypothesis and autosuggestion. It's an underplayed distraction to what really matters – that Kolodner and fellow murder suspect Ted Laplat become drawn into a paranoia that not only finds themselves believing in the occult but also contributes to their downfall. *The Kirlian Witness* may be more a new-agey Poe update than a film about Gaia or cosmic communion.

Sarno is smart enough to keep the tone of his film quiet; the unspoken joke is that characters communicate better with plants than with each other. It's hard trying to pin down how they relate to each other – their roles as sister, husband, friend, or employee are non-specific. They don't even seem overly upset at the deaths that occur in the story (note that the violence towards plants is handled with just as much attention as that of the human characters). With the exception of Laplat, who has some good exchanges with Kolodner, the novice cast doesn't give a performance that promises film careers – at least Sarno got Hollywood veteran Lawrence Tierney on board in a supporting role. *The Kirlian Witness* was marketed as a horror picture (it was also released as *The Plants are Watching*), although it is really an alternative take on crime thrillers. The economical storyline provides only two suspects, but delivers a satisfying conclusion. Coincidentally 1978 also saw the release of the documentary *The Secret Life of Plants*, better known for its Stevie Wonder soundtrack, which made the Top Ten. The book of the same name can be glimpsed in Sarno's film.

KITTEN WITH A WHIP (1964) 82m. It's not as outrageous or kinky as the title might suggest, but this early Ann-Margret feature still has claws, even if they're just playful kitten ones. She's a teenage runaway named Jody who invades the home of a straight-laced senatorial candidate (John Forsyte) whose wife and daughter are out of town. Naturally, Jody decides she'll stay a while. The home-as-battlefield scenario has always been a standby for budget-conscious producers (a coupla actors, one set, bingo!), and initially *Kitten* looks set to repeat the pattern: mind games, oneupmanship, territorial dominance, et al. But Ann-Margret's Jody has no time for subtlety; she plays coy for only a few moments before switching to petulant. We know we can never trust characters like these in the movies so

it's refreshing to have her cut to the chase and dispense with the game-playing early on in the film. The path of the story is clear – Forsyte is in over his head with this wildcat and the two of them are going to keep battling it out one of them wins. Ann-Margret is fine as the two-dimensional bad girl (you won't feel anything for or against her) because her cartoonlike manner is just the kind of thing that would bewilder Forsyte's character. However, as a couple they don't look as if they would sustain a two-character drama, which is why it's a good thing that Jody takes a back seat upon the arrival of three of her juvie friends. This middle chapter of the film is great fun to watch as we can never predict just what each character is going to do or say next (many other films of this type usually botch things up at this point by introducing a feverish, hysterical pitch). Peter Brown and Skip Ward steal the film as a couple of conflicted, philosophical beat-talking buddies who absolutely refuse to conform to juvenile delinquent stereotypes. Ironically, though Forsyte remains restrained and clear-thinking throughout his situation, it's Ann-Margret, Brown and Ward who use the law against him, twisting his sense of right and wrong, and citing felonies to keep him under their control. The final section of the film, which unexpectedly departs from the confines of the house and heads off on a road trip, drops characters in and out of the story with every new twist. In many ways Forsyte is a straight man in a farce – he's like *Fawlty Towers*' insufferable hotelier Basil Fawlty, ad-libbing a series of snowballing lies to maintain an appearance of control. The film's one hilarious scene, which winds up with Forsyte and his friends seated in a seedy club, practically moves the story out of reality and into nightmare. Indeed, in the film's finale Foryste awakens to discover that the agent of his ordeal has provided him with the opportunity to erase the entire story. Was it all a dream? The dramatic images of the final scenes would certainly fit one. *Kitten With a Whip* isn't a trash movie (they try to dude it up a little by filching Henry Mancini's theme from *Touch of Evil*) but isn't a mainstream movie either. It's too original for that. "Cool it, you creep, and co-exist!"

KNIGHTRIDERS (1981) 145m. Not the feature version of that TV show about the crime-fighter and his talking car, although it does sound just as silly in summary: a performance troupe in modern-day America motorcycles from town to town in full mediaeval regalia and stages combat with each other. This would be an odd choice for any director, but is certainly out of character for George A. Romero, who until this point was known only for his popular (though heavily cult-bound) horror films. I guess because it is so out of character that we have to assume that this was a personal project of the director's – the film he always 'wanted' to make.

Ed Harris is the self-appointed king of the motorcyclists, but there is a pretender to the throne (Romero's favorite makeup artist Tom Savini, who really looks the part as Morgan) who has more progressive ideas for the troupe. The twist is that the microcosm – or microkingdom – of the traveling players is unconsciously playing out the last days of Camelot, chivalry, and the whole Arthurian mythos. Harris is a throwback to an outmoded (and erroneous) notion of knights in shining armor – much like the legendary Arthur his world is overtaken by science (technology / machines) and reason (commerce / business). His romantic milieu is breaking down, and its conflicts are plain to see – half of the troupe is named after tales of Arthur and Robin Hood while the other half is nondescript and ordinary; his minstrels are drowned out by disco music; dangerous weapons are indistinguishable from props; one half of his men must replay battles against the other, again and again; and of course his knights ride motorcycles instead of horses. I have the feeling that this latter point was the main inspiration behind Romero's film (it dominated the film's advertising) and that the paradoxical image of knights jousting on motorcycles was of more interest to him that any desire to rework mediaeval mythology. Unfortunately, it's only when Romero is aware of what he's up to that the film has its clunkiest moments – Harris' dialogue may be in keeping with his character, but if that's so, then his character isn't inspiring, just drippy (his scenes with Merlin, for example). In fact any scenes where the characters address each other as 'my liege' or 'my king', or act as if they are bound to their artificial world are the ones that are least effective – whenever there's a conflict or confrontation we wonder whether it's

based on personal issues or some wider concept inherited from the roles they have collectively locked themselves into. By the end we're ready to believe Harris should step down as king only because he's been playing the role too long and should just get back in step with the times.

Issues like these are not the heart of *Knightriders*, however, and the drawcard for many theatregoers in 1981 would have been the expertly handled action sequences – it didn't hurt that these would have cashed in on the *Mad Max* films that were also around at the time. The film's abrupt conclusion pretty much denies all the naiveté that underpins its central idea. An unusual assortment of music helps this look like a product of the mid-seventies. Actually, it could also be read as a palimpsest about the end of the 1960s, under the more obvious Arthurian analogy – these guys come across more as burnt-out hippies than historical role-players. Watch for horror writer (and friend of Romero's) Stephen King in a cameo as a spectator.

THE LAST MAN ON EARTH (1964) 86m.

George Romero's knockout zombie film *Night of the Living Dead* may have influenced many imitators from the late 60s on, but if you dig a little further back you'll find it had roots of its own in this AIP adaptation of Richard Matheson's novel 'I am Legend'. Vincent Price (who had already starred in half a dozen previous Matheson scripts) plays Robert Morgan, a scientist eking out a lonely existence in a world devastated by plague. The screenplay divides neatly into thirds: the first act looks at Price's daily routine, the second is a flashback tracing the antecedents of the apocalypse, and the third is a mini-drama contained within itself, with new characters and plot turns.

As it turned out, Matheson, who co-scripted the screenplay, disliked the finished result so much that he credited himself with a pseudonym. It's hard to tell what he may have been disappointed with, but it could have simply been that *The Last Man on Earth* isn't sufficiently scary. This is easier to take in retrospect because contemporary audiences don't expect old modestly-budgeted AIP productions to scare them anyhow. As far as horror is concerned, the film is let down by Sidney Salkow's lethargic direction of its monsters: the ghouls that surround Price's house, moaning his name and pounding ineffectually against the walls are strikingly redolent of the zombies from *Living Dead* but far less frightening. It was a mistake of the film-makers to show Price – no he-man himself – pushing away marauders early on in the story (one potentially scary scene, when Price realizes he has dozed off until the sunset, is otherwise spoiled); only much later in the film do we hear him explain that he doesn't really fear them due to their limited mental and physical state. Their slow, dazed condition also pushes aside the vampire theme in the novel, which is treated sporadically here. Mirrors, garlic, and zombies? It doesn't add up.

Monsters aside, *The Last Man on Earth* is worthy of attention from horror buffs. Instead of frights it offers a somber look at an entropic world. Life after the apocalypse isn't scary or exciting, just dull: Price performs daily rituals perfunctorily; the only time we see him listening to music is when he is drowning out the sound of the ghouls outside; his cars of choice are black, hearse-like stationwagons; his stooped figure wandering outdoors in bright, harsh sunlight becomes no more than a dried husk moving about in a lifeless world (even his name, Morgan, connotes death). In this film we start at the end and are then nudged along to the very end – there's one nice touch in a flashback when Price realizes that the disease is airborne and the camera cuts to dead autumn leaves blowing in the wind. Price's saturnine persona works well in this film (he can see there's no point being hammy this time around) and makes the story's dramatic punctuations more effective (the bodies being consigned to the pit remind us disturbingly of the Holocaust). The film's low budget arguably works in its favor, too. We're not presented with city-wide panic, hysterical crowds, riots, or looting. Budgetary constraints limit our experience of the plague to a newspaper clipping, a few military trucks, and a growing detachment with friends and

colleagues. The whole planet is just slowly winding down. *The Last Man on Earth* is undeniably as much mood as it is concept, but its final line of dialogue does make the theme of the novel more patent: if there is one human living in a world of vampires, which becomes the monster? This gives one brief scene of Price attacking a young female ghoul – who cowers on a bed in fright – more weight than you may first think.

THE LAST SUPPER (1995) 92m. A drawing room comedy for the 90s. A group of postgrad students (Cameron Diaz, Courney B. Vance, Annabeth Gish, and others) meet every Sunday for dinner to socialize and discuss politics, art, and philosophy. After sharing their table with an unexpected guest they come to the conclusion that talk is cheap, and that the only way to make the world the better place they dream of is to set themselves up as judge, jury, and executioners, and rid it of all the people that would impede their vision. From that point on, the dinner parties become trials. The story will hold your attention – its characters are literate and varied enough to encompass a range of opinions – but it's really a one-note symphony. The first dinner party is essentially a setup for the last: looking back you'll see there is no need for the several similar scenes other than to chart the development of the characters' convictions or doubts. To give us a sense that the story is going somewhere, screenwriter Dan Rosen trails a subplot through the film involving a police officer and a missing girl, but the fact remains that the two dinner conversations that bookend the film outweigh the others in between. The first of these, with Bill Paxton, blends wit and tension effectively enough for us to look forward to a rematch with the postgrads' nominal nemesis Norman Arbuthnot (Ron Perlman, who plays his TV broadcaster like Rod Serling in narrator mode). Paxton and Perlman are great, and certainly more likely to remain in your memory than the walk-ons by Charles Durning, Mark Harmon, and Jason Alexander.

The Last Supper's message can be summed up with the tried and true 'what goes around comes around' and when the students start turning into the persecutors that they hate, the only real surprise is why none of them were ever bright enough to see it happening (although Diaz is the first to voice her disapproval). They're also too caught up in what they're doing to see that the people they are setting up as targets are becoming successively less extreme and increasingly marginal as candidates for their agenda. It was an interesting choice to make the group's only black character the most fascistic of the group. The best moment of the film is also its most subtle, when at the height of their fanaticism the characters are suddenly reminded of the real, normal world existing outside their house by something as simple as a hold signal on a telephone. Continuity problem: if we are to assume that one of the students is responsible for the paintings we see in the credits, how does that explain the last picture?

THE LAST UNICORN (1982) 94m. This thoughtful animated fantasy may be too wordy for some children but should appeal to kids who like to read. It's a little slow at the start but worth sticking with. The last unicorn of the title (voiced by Mia Farrow) is searching for others of her kind, believing the answer lies in a rundown castle near the sea. This is the standard 'quest' material that most fantasy is made of, but in this case heroics and spectacle are secondary to drama, which may explain the presence of big names in the cast. Alan Arkin, Jeff Bridges, Christopher Lee, Tammy Grimes, Angela Lansbury, and Keenan Wynn all voice characters that have a passing resemblance to their real selves. The animation, produced in Japan, isn't on a par with Disney, and the female characters have those irritating oversized eyes that are symptomatic of *anime* figures, but it holds up. *The Last Unicorn* has many original touches and deals with love, regret, myth versus reality, and its major theme, the subjectivity of truth. Unlike most animated films, this one doesn't throw in slapstick or comedy relief (although Arkin has some light moments). Every character bears some form of loss – unconsciously they join the unicorn on quests of their own to look beyond illusion and archetype. Not all of them find what they're looking for. The film doesn't handle these ideas in an exclusively adult way (it still comes across as a children's cartoon), and makes pleasant family viewing. I can imagine it being watched at

home by mothers and their daughters during school holidays. Peter S. Beagle adapted his own novel for the screen – he was also responsible for the difficult task of adapting *The Lord of the Rings* for Ralph Bakshi a few years earlier. Pop group America perform Jimmy Webb's songs and help add to the story's wistful mood.

THE LAST VOYAGE (1960) 87m. In this gripping production by veteran writer-director Andrew L. Stone a luxury liner takes in water and slowly sinks during an ocean cruise. Disaster-movie convention would have us expect the usual mob panic, cross-section of characters, and sweaty, tight-jawed troubleshooters but Stone has seen all this before. Instead, the calamity of the shipwreck is focused into one event: a passenger (Dorothy Malone) has her leg trapped under wreckage in her cabin. Throughout the film we watch, with mounting tension, as her husband (Robert Stack) tries to save her and their child (Tammy Marihugh, well directed in her role). It's a nifty twist on a familiar theme that only one passenger on a sinking ocean liner should be in any danger, but Stone wrings it for all it is worth. Ultimately the emotive scale of a disaster can still be measured with just one human life. You'll empathize with Stack as he struggles with a cumbersome oxygen tank, knowing that he is asking the impossible of himself to save his wife. As her death – i.e., her 'last voyage' – becomes imminent, the story shifts attention to the survival of Stack and Marihugh, who are too distraught to leave her. At which point do the living acknowledge responsibility to continue on for the sake of the dying?

We don't have much time to dwell on this dilemma because Stone keeps events moving. The film is told from two perspectives, that of the family and those of the chief crew. George Sanders has played enough cads in his time to make us assume his Captain qualifies as the 'villain' of the piece. But he really makes only one bad decision – he's willing to enlist the advice and skills of his crew and do everything he can to keep his passengers safe from that point on. Stone's direction is unhurried and functions without sensation – the flooding interiors of the ship are entirely believable, and the sinking of the ship is done with slow, steady, technical precision. Note also the use of natural sounds to heighten atmosphere – there's barely a note of music played. The only bad call is John Houseman's portentous voice-overs that appear every time we see the ship in long-shot. Presumably this was added to remind us that the liner was indeed sinking.

LEGEND (1985) 89m. Forest-dwelling boy (Tom Cruise) takes pure-of-heart princess (Mia Sara) to see unicorns and then loses them to Dark Lord underground. With help from faerie folk of the wood, boy mounts rescue attempt. Some may be spellbound by Ridley Scott's 1985 fantasy – others will find it tedious. *Legend*'s slight story gave some critics cause to dismiss it as an overblown jumble, but that's no reason not to enjoy the sumptuous vision Scott brings to the screen – it's as if Tolkien had hired him to make a TV commercial for Middle-Earth.

The thinly-drawn characters of Jack (surely Cruise's oddest role) and Lili are also likely targets for criticism, but Scott is less interested in unraveling a plot than he is in capturing the look and feel of myth. Lili (a.k.a. Lily, the symbol of virginity) and Jack (one of the most common names in folk tales and nursery rhymes) are character types, not character studies. We are never told what Lili is the princess of; we have no idea what Jack does in the forest. Everything is generic, nothing has a definite location in time or place. But I'm glad Scott didn't include any phoney-baloney character development just because he was making a film in the progressive 80s. He presents *Legend* in exactly the manner that the title would suggest – as a universally recognized consciousness, where archetypes replace personalities. Unfortunately, this is to the expense of Tim Curry's Dark Lord, the most memorable character in the movie, who once again proves that the devil gets all the best lines. Curry steals the show with his performance – it's a shame he doesn't get a chance to do more in the picture. Scott sidesteps his uninvolving characters by keeping his frame as busy as possible. Never in my life have I seen so much *billowing* in a movie before. Leaves, snow, smoke, petals, steam – Scott keeps the air alive (I think he's going overboard when he introduces soap bubbles) to remind us that the story is steeped in a magical atmosphere, and also to highlight the sentience of air

as an elemental force. The other three elements of ancient cosmology – fire, water, and earth – are similarly dominant throughout the story: Jack swims underwater, breaks through ice, is covered by snow, journeys into the earth, battles through steam and fire, and even harnesses the power of the sun for his final victory.

Legend is gorgeously photographed, and invokes a dreamlike world – amazingly, it was all shot on a soundstage (which even more amazingly was reconstructed after it was destroyed by fire). Jerry Goldsmith's beautiful score functions so well it's hard to imagine watching this film without it, yet it was unceremoniously dumped during re-editing for the U.S. release (among the 30 minutes of cut footage was the scene where Mia Sara earns the trust of the unicorns by singing to them) and replaced with a synthesizer soundtrack by Tangerine Dream that was supposed to appeal to a younger audience.

LET IT BE (1970) 81m. The final film to star The Beatles featured the foursome as themselves (although that's all they ever played in their other movies) and documented their work in the Apple studios recording new material for what was to become their last produced album, 'Let it Be'. Although the extent of the friction between the members of the group wouldn't be publicized until their break-up, it can still be sensed in some scenes of the film – it's unfortunate that this behind-the-scenes footage takes a back seat to the music (as terrific as this is) as *Let it Be* is the only glimpse we will have of the world's most successful and influential musical group at work.

It wasn't only the songs for the album but also the concept of the film itself that caused some disagreement among the band members, although *Let it Be* does end up taking on a shape of its own. For most of the film we watch the group at work on songs that were either included in the final cut, ditched, or destined for the following 'Abbey Road' album, and then see the finished arrangements performed spontaneously in the famous rooftop sequence at the film's conclusion. It's especially interesting to see these songs get roughed out at the beginning of the film before they reappear later in their finished form. 'Two of Us' starts out surprisingly as a rocking number with an Elvis snarl thrown in, before evolving into the folksy version that got recorded; George helps out with chord progressions for Ringo's new composition 'Octopus's Garden'; and the group performs a stripped-down version of 'The Long and Winding Road', which would eventually undergo orchestral and choral arrangements without their approval. It's also fun to see the band jamming to give themselves a break from the rigours of crafting the songs (and no doubt to release the tension in the studio). But who can blame them for feeling stifled? Unenthusiastic about the level of hysteria created in their live concerts at the peak of their stardom, the group had withdrawn to recording studios in search of new challenges. By the time of *Let it Be*, their Apple studio appears to be a dull, featureless refuge, inhabited by four superstars with nothing to do but pass the time tinkering with songs.

Let it Be's insight to the band can best be measured by erasing any knowledge of its members beforehand. Through these eyes it would appear that Paul is the driving force behind the group, trying to keep it "all about the music"; John is neutral and remote, constantly accompanied by his spookily silent wife Yoko; George seems resigned to the fact that he is something of a supporting player despite his own talent (it's no surprise to see him performing his new song 'I Me Mine' for Ringo rather than his other two songwriting partners); and Ringo simply keeps things genial and goes with the flow. The only time these four people hang out together is when they play.

It's not so much the friction as the sense of boredom and confinement that *Let it Be* conveys. In one revealing conversation Paul speaks to John about how he wishes someone had recorded their earliest work in Hamburg, which was the Beatles at their best, without an audience, and how he and the others have always felt nervous about performing live. It's noteworthy that Paul sings directly to the camera, which in effect has now become the group's only audience. Happily, the group does perform to a gathering of surprised onlookers for one final time when they escape from the studio and play a rousing live set outdoors on the roof, belting out new numbers like 'Get Back' and 'One After 909'

(ironically one of the first songs John and Paul ever wrote). The ending of the film is now well known – the band abruptly put down their instruments and walk off by orders of the police – but for cinema audiences in 1970 it must have seemed a washout. Maybe that's why *Let it Be* isn't embraced as widely as other Beatles efforts, which invariably show them in a happier and more carefree light. It's hard to miss the shot of a half-eaten apple sitting on a piano in the opening scene of this film; it seems an early tip-off from director Michael Lindsay-Hogg that, for The Beatles and their fans, the dream is over. Let it be, indeed.

LET IT RIDE (1989) 87m. This comedy set during one day at the racetrack may be torture for serious punters. Richard Dreyfuss finds he is on an uncharacteristic winning streak, but instead of cashing in his ticket he keeps parlaying his bet. As each race runs its course he finds himself seduced by the new levels of track society that open up before him. You'll find yourself wanting to scream "Stop!" when Dreyfuss is about to make what may be his last gamble. Despite being restricted to one setting, Ernest Moreton's script (from a novel by Jay Cronley) contains a real sense of progression. Dreyfuss starts his day kneeling before a toilet in a punter's bar, but gradually moves through the different strata of the racetrack world – the Jockey Club, the cashier's office, the counting room; similarly, as his winnings accrue and he starts planning what to do with the money, we see his future being laid out before us; and of course there are the relationships that keep developing throughout the course of the story as he attracts more attention. Here, having too much money is just as offensive to the regular high-rollers than having too little. Jennifer Tilly, in another of her bubblehead roles, seems to be attracted to Dreyfuss only because of his newly-won money (or is it luck?) but remains strangely consistent throughout the story. The others don't seem to have any particular stance – cashier Robbie Coltrane does a 180^{o} turn, Dreyfuss' friends keep vacillating, and wife Teri Garr is in a state of constant bewilderment.

Dreyfuss gives an energetically comic performance – the kind of thing we thought he'd left behind with *The Goodbye Girl* (and just the role Jack Lemmon would have played if this film had been made twenty years earlier). He's an ideal choice for the role of a small-time gambler – his slight stature, beady eyes, and moustache make him look right at home at the track. Garr, an appealing actress, is once again saddled with the Wife/Mother role (she'd already had one marriage on the rocks with Dreyfuss in *Close Encounters*). The fringe characters, right down to the smallest bit parts, all have personality. Everyone has their own system, mostly reliant on intuition – although *Let it Ride* doesn't give the impression that it is pro-gambling. Rather, its message is that there is no workable system, and that everyone has one "really good day" inside them, whether at the track, the office, the sports field, or anywhere else. It's a feel-good movie without the schmaltz – the dreamy look on Dreyfuss' face during the vital seconds of his last race indicate that in his mind he has already won. Or, to adopt a truism, it's not whether you win or lose, but how you place the bet that counts. The racetrack is utilized well as the film's central setting – it's nice for a change to see a cinema portrayal of the track which is sunny, friendly and lively, instead of the usual seediness and vice that usually ends up on screen.

A LITTLE ROMANCE (1979) 108m. This light-hearted film by George Roy Hill shows once again how assuredly he is able to work in any genre of his choosing. Two young teenaged geniuses (played by newcomers Diane Lane and Thelonious Bernard) meet by chance in Paris and pledge their hearts to each other. They enlist the aid of an elderly gentleman (Laurence Olivier) to arrange themselves an interlude in Italy away from Lane's disapproving mother. Amazingly, this film works despite what should be its only real weak point – Lane and Bernard's lack of chemistry together. They are immediately likeable as individuals: Lane is impish yet level-headed; Bernard is savvy without being smarmy, and their friendship is believable. Still, they don't demonstrate enough emotional highs and lows to prove themselves to us as lovers (although they are at least idealistic). *A Little Romance* manages a perfect combination of elements: engaging performances, romantic European locations, a

buoyant score (borrowed from Vivaldi), and a smart, observant screenplay.

Hill avoids conscious stylistic elements and plays it low-key, making this more European and less American than his other films (Americans aren't portrayed flatteringly in this picture). His shots of the youngsters watching movies or scampering through the city streets may remind you of Truffaut. Hill also throws in a couple of references to his own movies, and has Bernard first meet Lane when he sneaks on to a film set – significantly, she's less interested in the film than the book she is reading. Bernard compares their partnership to Bogart and Bacall; Lane is more excited about being in the birthplace of Romeo and Juliet; Bernard is a fan of Robert Redford; Lane prefers Elizabeth Barrett Browning. While both read literature, it's only Bernard who enthuses about film. It's interesting, because while Bernard is the one more fascinated by the world of make-believe, it is the philosophy-reading Lane that wants to live out a romantic caprice. And thrown into the mix is Olivier, going one step further and fabricating his entire life (as it turns out, nearly everyone in this film is living a lie of one kind or another). Not one of this trio has the power to fulfil a fantasy on their own: it's the melding of their different forms of escapism that finally mobilize all three.

Hill, a notoriously practical director, balances the romantic foolishness of his protagonists' escapade with a sense of studied feasibility. What's really inspiring about *A Little Romance* is that it doesn't place its premise out of our reach – I don't doubt that several viewers have similarly sought out the story's special kiss on the waterways of Venice. And of course it's great to see Olivier delivering a foxy performance as an old Parisian, enjoying the screen time he has with his much younger co-stars. Like romance itself, this film has a timeless quality – it still holds up well after years of viewing.

LOLITA (1997) 137m. I did not really want to like this film when it finally reached cinemas. In a display of petulance befitting its title character, I spent the best part of two years rehearsing my gripe about how Adrian Lyne deserved to fail spectacularly for having the chutzpah to tamper with such a classic. It wasn't just me. It seemed everyone had a bone to pick with *Lolita* – its long-delayed and highly publicized search for a distributor was ample proof of that. There were the Nabokovians who didn't want to see their beloved classic – which rated #4 the following year on the 100-Best-Books-of-the-Century list – fall into the hands of the director responsible for such pop-sleaze as *9 ½ Weeks*, *Fatal Attraction* and *Indecent Proposal*. There were the usual lobbyists who objected to the film's subject matter presumably on the pretext that it would somehow endorse underage sexual activity (this argument is true inasmuch as cartoons promote the willful dropping of pianos onto pedestrians). And then there was a smaller arena of controversy – for all I know, I was the only person in it – which reads as thus: I just didn't like the thought of someone monkeying around with a story that had already been established as a film classic by Stanley Kubrick. For years film buffs had always thought of Kubrick's *Lolita* as the one, the only, definitive film version, shot in tasteful black and white, boasting sharp performances by James Mason and Peter Sellers, and forever fixing in our minds the image of a black and white Sue Lyon and her heart-shaped sunglasses as the title character.

And then along comes Lyne. I remember feeling furious when I first read of his intentions for a remake. But maybe it's just as well that there was a two-year hiatus as a cooling-off period, because by the time of the film's release I was ready to accept Lyne's *Lolita* as an alternative, not a replacement.

Sticking faithfully to the text and events of the book (although Lolita is a couple of years older in the film, one concession Lyne felt obliged to make to take off some of the heat), *Lolita* is a sumptuous, mesmerizing piece of work. I can't think of anything else quite like it, although Visconti springs clearly to mind in the opening scenes. Unlike Kubrick's cool, black comedy, Lyne's *Lolita* displays a much broader emotional tapestry – with remarkable ease he moves between scenes of drama, humor, eroticism, and romance. The storyline parallels Kubrick's version closely, reminding us that the 1962 film probably wasn't as much of a departure from the book as it first seemed: Humbert Humbert (Jeremy Irons) falls in love with 14-year old Lolita (newcomer

Dominique Swain) and marries her mother (Melanie Griffith) just to be near her. A few weeks after the marriage, he becomes a widower and finds he has 'Lo' all to himself.

The performances Lyne draws from Irons and Swain are arresting – these two have more intense screen time together than any other recent couple that I remember, and sparks are always flying. Right from the tortured timbre of Iron's opening narration it's plain to see that this is a tale of the heart. It's interesting because the romance is purely on Humbert's behalf (the film's prologue does well to establish his motivation as the pursuit of an ideal rather than lust-driven obsession), and even when Lolita draws her role in the story to a close with the unconsciously cruel remark about "the only man I was ever crazy about" (which he knows isn't him) he finds himself evermore besotted with her. Nowhere in this story does either one of them say that they love one another – instead, all we hear is their refrain "I'm sorry".

The on-screen relationship between Swain and Irons was always going to be Lyne's most difficult task, but he pulls it off. The obvious tack is to make Humbert the innocent one and Lolita the manipulator, but this is just as liable to elicit charges of unfair sexual politicking: that young teens are being grossly misrepresented as knowing carnal creatures. Instead, Lyne shows us how gauche Lolita is – the kind of thing that would be anti-erotic to anyone but idealistically-blinded Humbert. Swain moves everywhere with lanky, lumpy gestures; she sprawls over furniture, chews gum, fidgets, sneers at her mother, thinks only of herself and depends on two favored expressions – sleepy and sassy. She is indifferent, a behavior that Humbert confuses with a power he believes inherent to all nymphets, yet far from naive – she for one has not mistaken their escapade for some wildly romantic journey. If Nabokov's book is a portrait of the hedonistic bubblegum heart of America then Swain's Lolita ably incarnates his themes, and Irons' Humbert is suitably by turns amused, irritated, and bewildered.

Looking at the thoughtful and detailed work that Lyne has done with *Lolita* it is easy to believe that this is his best film – certainly since his debut *Foxes* which in itself was not without Lolitaesque colorings. He is able to include head-and-shoulder-only lovemaking scenes between Swain and Irons without making it offensive (at the point that Humbert is ready to acknowledge that their relationship would be seen as nothing more than the corruption of a minor, Swain interrupts and diverts him with the facetious remark "the word is incest"). It isn't sordid or exploitative, and while it may be romantic, and even arousing, it is held in check by a sense of mistrust. Ennio Morricone's lush score and Howard Atherton's beautiful, drowsy cinematography wrap *Lolita* in a doomed wistfulness. It's a good example of how human emotion can really be amplified in a cinema with the right use of images and sound.

It's a shame that *Lolita* had such a troubled history, and that I was among those who doubted it could have been anything other than an attempt to cash in on a controversial title. As Lolita herself might have said, who woulda thunk it?

LORD LOVE A DUCK (1966) 104m. After half an hour of viewing this cult comedy you may feel a little disappointed that it fails to live up to the wackiness of its opening scenes. But, like me, you may also find it easier viewing the second time around – after all, maintaining the high energy of its first few minutes for over an hour and a half is a difficult undertaking for any film. Director George Axelrod probably chooses the right road: the main function of *Lord Love a Duck*'s daffy (pun intended) opening is to set us up for the offbeat story which follows while also allowing various bits of weird nonsense to be dropped in here and there without having them feel jarringly out of place.

Roddy McDowall is a high-school genius who gives himself the nickname Mollymauk, after a type of albatross. He surprises young Tuesday Weld one night and, with no explanation, immediately sets himself up as her mentor, protector, provider, and personal djinn. He sets events into motion that make her wishes come true, but then whimsically creates minor obstacles which he in turn whole-heartedly sets about overcoming. It's a strange relationship. At the film's conclusion, McDowall (who has been relating the story in flashback) states emphatically that he did it all "for love". The first time I saw *Lord Love a Duck* I found this abrupt ending a little hard to

swallow – especially since one of the wishes he grants Weld is marriage to a wealthy high school senior. Forewarned in the second viewing, it's apparent that there could be no logical reason for McDowall's behavior anyway, so settling for a motive as irrational as love is as good a reason as any. I'm still not convinced, though: I think it's more likely that McDowall, as a genius, is terribly lonely and simply wants to share his perspective of the world with someone he has an interest in. He represents himself to Weld by two symbols of freedom – birds and keys. He even goes so far as to hypnotize Weld with keys, frequently dangling them in front of her face to establish himself as her personal liberator. McDowall already has freedom – his superior intellect and physical prowess (he takes care of the school bruiser without getting his feathers ruffled) enable him to do pretty much whatever he wishes. Choreographing Weld's life keeps him occupied until her desires are almost completely fulfilled, upon which he finds himself back where he started and can only respond by running amok.

The McDowall/Weld relationship is set against a satirical background which is just as odd as they are. Their high school has become ludicrously 'progressive' under the leadership of principal Harvey Korman (it's unusual to see him with black hair!); they make a deal with a movie producer who specializes in quickie Beach Party films; and while McDowall's family is absent throughout the film, Weld's parents are only half present – her mother picks up men in bars, and her father, who makes a memorable appearance in one of the film's most manic scenes, seems about two steps away from the booby hatch. If that wasn't enough, Ruth Gordon also turns up halfway through the story as the mother of Weld's boyfriend. It's another of her acerbic, domineering roles, in which she constantly berates her son for his failed suicide attempts (it's actually McDowall who's cheerfully trying to knock him off!) and breezes through every scene as if she owns it. *Lord Love a Duck* is something of a grab-bag – it doesn't have something for everyone, but anyone with an interest in 60s cinema should give it a try. There are probably more insights about the story and its characters in Al Hine's novel, if you can ever find a copy.

LOST HORIZON (1973) 146m. Any *Lost Horizon* remake in the 70s was sure to have been spurned by those who remembered Frank Capra's 1937 version, but producer Ross Hunter could have saved himself some extra grief if he hadn't also decided to turn it into a musical. Burt Bacharach was a bankable name as the composer, but in the format of the Hollywood musical – a genre that was already dead in the 70s anyhow – he wasn't able to replicate the success he'd gotten from penning hit songs for pop performers in the 60s. Granted, there were big names in the cast, John Gielgud, Liv Ullmann, and Peter Finch among them, but the nature of the story (people discover a mountain paradise and decide to stay there) didn't allow much for their characters to do. *Lost Horizon* quickly got a reputation as a dud and I'm sure it features in more than a couple of those 'Worst Movie' books than churn themselves out every so often, but after one TV viewing many years ago I was willing to give it a second chance with a much better presentation in widescreen with a sparkling soundtrack and missing musical numbers restored.

The story starts in rousing fashion with crowds panicking at a remote airfield, planes roaring above the mountains, a hijacking, subsequent crash, and trek into snowy peaks, but at the moment the characters descend into the valley of Shangri-La the film, in unconscious critical mimicry, goes downhill. It's after 40 minutes that the first song appears, but since it finally brings the exotic Olivia Hussey into the movie, it's entirely forgivable. The second song appears more jarringly, 'The World is a Circle' springing out of Liv Ullmann's lips before we get a chance to know who she is. Its calliope rhythm is buoyant and the choreography appropriately childlike (schoolkids link hands, nod heads, and skip), but by the time of the third song, *Lost Horizon* starts getting a little harder to love. The chorus of 'Living Together' has a Bacharach pop hook in the chorus catchy enough to make you desperately want it to succeed in spite of a clumsy opening verse and truly lousy editing of the entire sequence. I would also blame the choreography, if I could find trace of any. On the face of it Hunter must have decided that characters bursting into rousing song-and-dance

numbers would have been too old-fashioned or detract from the film's solemnity, or, dare I say it 'realism', which is why the first three songs all have a context in which to exist – an evening's entertainment, a classroom singalong, and a ceremony. But from this point, all has been lost, including the horizon. The remaining musical numbers are pitched into the storyline in the Hollywood tradition of having characters spontaneously emoting in song, and Hal David's awful lyrics uniformly follow the same brief ("Let's sing about how great Shangri-La is!"); the solid work done by Finch at the beginning of the film is undermined; Hussey is as endearing as ever but sadly underused (she and Michael York probably spent their time on set wishing they were back making *Romeo and Juliet*); and the subplots and romantic intrigues don't do anything other than bump the film's running time up to two and a half hours and give an excuse for more forgettable songs. After the last tune has been gotten out of the way, the story begins to pick up again, though possibly too late to rekindle the interest of all but diehard fans.

In an era of cultural capital such as fanedits and mashups (Terry Gilliam suggested early on that fans could use DVD/digital technology to reinsert deleted scenes back into his movies and create their own versions), *Lost Horizon* is prime for re-editing, especially into a cut the likes of which would have never been undertaken in 1973, namely, one without all the singing and dancing. Combining the idea of an all-star cast with musical numbers (something like "A star-studded musical set in the exotic land of Shangri-La!"), it seemed that Hunter was more interested in making "Ross'd Horizon" look good as an advertisement for a movie rather than the movie itself. He should have just quit with the poster.

LOST IN SPACE (1998) 124m. If any trend can bear witness to the all-too-often voiced complaint that Hollywood ran out of ideas a long time ago, then the recycling of 'classic' television shows into big-budget, star-powered cinema updates is jump-on-the-bandwagon thinking, of that there is no doubt. But unlike other trends of the late 90s – the 'based on video game' film, the 'return to the 70s disaster flicks', the 'make a movie from anything by Jane Austen' mini-booms – this bandwagon just keeps rolling. It could be said that the flood of old television to the box-office is less a process of revivifying our cultural past than colonizing it – the simple fact that we are in a position to look back gives us the right for enlightened comment and critique. Perhaps in the 90s it was a result of some kind of *fin-de-siecle* anxiety, harrying those in the entertainment industry to polish and repackage those old shows before they were looked back on as some potentially embarrassing remnant of the 20th century (Oh yes, of course we knew that show was stupid, but look, we made this out of it to prove that we knew). It's really more simple than either of these ideas: these TV makeovers are Hollywood's way of saying We know we've run out of ideas but we're just not trying to hide it any more so you'd better get used to it because the Baby Boomers are running this asylum now and we grew up with these old shows which is why you're going to take this reheated hash and scarf it up just the same way you've always done without any need for us to apologize for it.

This kind of honesty is almost beyond criticism. It's Hollywood waving its flag and saying, Look Ma, no ideas! So, for the most part, we've shut up and treated these films as the harmless reminiscences they inevitably turn out to be. Their treatment is wholly predictable: part revision, part homage, all marketing. But a few exceptions can slip through the net now and then, such as Betty Thomas' necessarily cruel (but affectionate – you can be as iconoclastic as you like with this nostalgia as long as you stay affectionate) repositioning of *The Brady Bunch*, and Brian De Palma's take on *Mission: Impossible*, which saw the Impossible Missions Force blown away in the first act (a move which several people were not pleased with, because with that one cavalier stroke, De Palma demonstrated that he was sadly lacking in that all-important affection for the original).

Which brings us to *Lost in Space*, and another problem concerning TV remakes, for it is impossible to separate the cinema experience from the historical product that has imprinted its own identity so firmly in our culture. *Lost in Space* was originally intended to be serious science-fiction but descended into camp once Jonathan Harris (Dr Smith, a murderous

saboteur who was meant to be written out after half a dozen episodes) started getting the most of the show's fan mail. Soon *Lost in Space* became nothing more than 'The Dr Smith, Will Robinson, and Robot Show', and as the budget became skimpier (which explains why they would spend a whole season on the same planet, then take off and land on another planet with the same rocks arranged differently) and the not-very-special effects even cheaper, the once-serious concept took on a wayward surrealism unprecedented in prime-time TV. In fact, for many young viewers the show's absurdity made it frightening. *Lost in Space* went beyond all logic and thus into the territory of nightmare. One episode that was particularly terrifying (for me, anyway) found Will and Doctor Smith in a fog-shrouded minimalist street set of Chinatown talking about buying hot dogs while oversized spiders lay lurking in the dark. With a memory of the show as vivid as that, how could any belated cinema remake stand alone?

Nevertheless, the 1998 *Lost in Space* manages to pull off this balancing act, and it does so by returning to the show's roots. It may be affectionate, spirited, even respectful in an odd sort of way, but most importantly it manages to do what its television predecessor could not – it has the muscle to back up its intentions. Its most apparent strength is the special effects, not only in quality but also sheer volume. It's strange that the 'biological' effects – i.e. monsters and critters in general – don't hold up as well as the rest, but in a strange way it is reflective of the monsters in the original show, which were just plain lousy (Look! There's a woman with her face painted green! Look! There's a guy wearing a sparkly bowler hat and a stocking over his head!). The second strength the 1998 version has is Akiva Goldsman's script, which manages to employ several motifs and undercurrents of the show without making them obvious in-jokes or necessary prerequisites with which to 'appreciate' the update. There are spins on the businesslike space-pioneer 'give-me-a-hand-with-the-force-field-Don' relationship (or non-relationship) between John Robinson and Don West; the friendship/bonding between Will and the Robot; and most dramatically, the unspoken (but apparent to those of us who were regular viewers of the series) surrogate father relationship Will had with Dr Smith – which in this version is pursued to a horrible conclusion the original producers could never have foreseen.

Fine so far, but will the show's fans like it? Fandom is a difficult demographic. The elements of the series held in most affection will be the same ones which most pointedly fail to deliver for several viewers on several levels, but the most common point of focus will be the replacement of new actors for old. Who, for example, could possibly replace Jonathan Harris as Doctor Smith? I wouldn't have gone with the film-makers' choice of Gary Oldman, but he does a creditable job. Jack Johnson similarly slips comfortably into the role of Will. I suspect it may be Lacey Chabert's portrayal of Penny that will rankle many fans (pure prejudice on my part, since I had an enormous crush on Angela Cartwright as a kid), whose character does admittedly become more engaging and less whiny as the film goes on, but what does she have to keep complaining about? At least the Robinsons have to be a step up from that *Party of Five* family she'd been stuck with for the previous five years. Perversely, it is the only non-human character of the series that is the most significantly irreplaceable. Hearing the voice of Dick Tufeld, the only actor from the original to reprise his role (the Robot) in the film, provides viewers with the most immediate nostalgic experience that *Lost in Space* has to offer – that, and I suppose the revamped title theme played over the end credits. The only major departure from prewritten characterization would be Don, as played by Matt LeBlanc – really, it's just another version of his character Joey from the sitcom *Friends* – but it's a satisfying change: at last we get to see Don hitting on John and Maureen Robinson's cute older daughter Judy. And about time.

Lost in Space is able to exist on its own terms as an imaginative and active space adventure, while still catering to fans of the original. I'd go as far as saying that it is the most enjoyable adaptation of a TV show I have yet seen. But once again, this is prejudice on my part – I can't think of many other shows (well, *Get Smart* was one) which spawned as many catch-phrases in the school playground. Most of them came from Smith, whether it was "The pain, the paaaiin" (usually when filing out for a PE lesson) or anything

ending with "Dear boy" (I'm sure also that many teachers must have gotten sick of kids responding with "Never fear, Smith is here" whenever they were appointed with some minor classroom task). However, as much as I enjoyed Smith I have to say it was Don who made me laugh the most when I revisited the TV show as an adult. Humorless Don, who for all appearances seemed to be a walking clockspring of repressed rage, and who could never speak to Smith without snarling ("You're a 24-carat goldbrick!"), was where we could see the reality outside the show intrude into its own peculiar universe; for this was Don-the-actor voicing on behalf of the rest of the Robinson Family with every snarl his extreme vexation about being relegated to the periphery while a camp old ham merrily stole the show right from under them. It makes you think about why Jonathan Harris was one of the few original cast members not to get a walk-on for the film version.

The series *Lost in Space* has become something of an institution now. Some may ask why any studio would bother to make an enormously expensive movie of a flimsy low-budget show thirty years later. Fans will reply that it had been a remake too long in coming. The facts, according to the original show, stated that the Robinsons blasted off into space on October 16, 1997. It's a shame the film's producers couldn't have arranged for their debut to coincide with date and bring the whole *Lost in Space* phenomenon full circle. As it stands, this new telling of that story wisely resets the launch date to September 30, 2058. I guess we can look forward to Hollywood's next onslaught of television remakes – remakes of remakes, in fact – around about that time.

THE LOST WORLD:JURASSIC PARK (1997)

130m. I once saw a festival release of Orson Welles' 1948 *Macbeth*, one of a number of Welles films screening retrospectively. Before it was halfway through the audience began to leave, until only half were left seated for the final credits. My viewing of the film was distracted twofold: firstly by the slow exodus of patrons, and secondly by the question that kept going through my mind: What Were They Expecting? You go to see Welles playing Macbeth... surely you expect to see just that – Welles playing Macbeth.

I have never responded the same to film criticism since. In the case of *The Lost World*, this argument would translate thusly: You go to see a movie about dinosaurs on the rampage, and what do you expect to see? Dinosaurs on the rampage. Your expectations are satisfied. If you go in expecting to see insights of any interpersonal, religious, philosophical, scientific, or religious nature; if you go in looking for subtexts, or representations of the human condition, or the growth and/or learning of individuals within group dynamics, then it is time for you to start reassessing your critical acumen, or go see a different movie.

Having attended a preview of *The Lost World* I was in the fortunate position of not having heard or read a single word about it (I confess this took some effort of ignorance on my part – and fortunately I had no inkling about the final twenty minutes), yet I had a foreboding about Spielberg's new film well before I saw it. It may not have been fashionable to like Spielberg this time around, and the critics might easily sneer at his dinosaur movie. Why? That question could easily be answered with another: What Were They Expecting?

As for my own reaction? As far as adventure movies go, *The Lost World* is a peach. It may be an even better ride than *Jurassic Park*, which it reworks unabashedly. The first forty-five minutes lack involvement, but once Spielberg hits his stride (in a socko set-piece inside a trailer) the film never lets up. The dinosaur attacks are relentless – and the assorted dinos get far more screen time than in the original – but even though *The Lost World* turns out to be a wholesale human slaughter, we're never made to feel the dinosaurs are villains. Spielberg restrains sentimentality and doesn't get us feeling they are the good guys either – they're simply enormous animals, and there is no need to portray them as enraged monsters (although there is a humorous reference to *Godzilla* at one point). The dinosaurs work: not because they have been meticulously recreated by the ILM effects studio, but because, as in *Jurassic Park*, their behavior and reactions are entirely believable.

Fans of Crichton's book *Jurassic Park* will be pleased to see some moments from the original story make their way into the movie sequel – notably the

opening scene on a beach, and a sequence with a T-Rex at a waterfall. And it's great to see the raptors utilizing one of their scarier talents in the book by really leaping about everywhere. Screenwriter David Koepp, who worked with Crichton on the first film, goes solo this time and eliminates most of the unnecessary fussing-about-between-locations of the novel in favour of a more linear narrative. Spielberg choreographs his stunts and twists with relish – his only misjudged moment involves a youngster and some unlikely acrobatics – but there is a peculiar, distancing tone to his work. *Jurassic Park*'s underlying philosophy was optimistic: the dream of an enthusiast which turns out badly. *The Lost World* is darker, unsympathetic, and far from noble, in which the innocent as well as the guilty pay the price. This, ultimately, may be what prevents it from being enjoyable to some viewers – while others may feel it plainly isn't dark enough.

In *The Lost World* Spielberg revisits *Jurassic Park* and expands upon every set piece of that predecessor (Jeff Goldblum's knockabout scene with the raptors is a highlight) as well as adding new surprises. It's about as good as any dinosaur movie could be (Oh yeah, there were human actors in it too – Goldblum, Julianne Moore, Pete Postlethwaite – they're all fine) and if such films wind up being wearily dismissed by the ever-growing number of critics that seem to have forgotten what it was like to go to the movies as a kid, well then, one can only wonder if Spielberg might not do it all again with one more entry in the *Jurassic Park* series: An island, a pack of raptors, half-a-dozen Tyrannosaurs, and a hand-picked selection of film critics. I'd pay to see that.

MAD DOG TIME (1996) 93m. Love it or loathe it, writer-producer-director Larry Bishop's debut outing is destined for cult heaven. In summary, it sounds like a run-of-the-mill mob flick: Gangland boss Vic (Richard Dreyfuss) is returning to his nightclub after being released from incarceration. Other would-be mob bosses (Kyle MacLachlan, Burt Reynolds, Gregory Hines, to name a few) wonder how to use this situation to their best advantage. They don't wonder too hard – everyone's solution to problems in this scenario is simply to shoot everyone else dead, which is exactly what transpires, in one measured showdown after another, until the film's conclusion.

The lack of compunction or consequence resulting from this gunplay pushes *Mad Dog Time* well beyond the fringe of reality, but that's understandable: Vic is being released not from a prison, but an asylum – this story may be taking place entirely within his head. That's one plausible reason, at least, for the over-tanned blemish-free makeup smothering all the characters (Dreyfuss himself is positively pancaked with the stuff) – the inhabitants of Vic's world are as neat and tidy as the precise, bloodless killings within it. There's also the opening narration about the entrance of a new universe, the references to the Big Bang theory and Vic's conversations with God, and the extreme closeup of Vic's eye in the final frames. Vic, as demented creator of an equally demented world, is ubiquitous throughout the story: other characters talk about him constantly whenever he is absent from a scene. In fact, Dreyfuss doesn't put in an appearance until considerable buildup has elapsed. It's an interesting effect, because despite our warnings that Vic is totally insane, Dreyfuss never actually does anything crazy (no crazier than his contemporaries, anyway). He needs do nothing more than stare benignly and let our imaginations wonder how psychotic he really is. There's almost one moment of revelation during Gabriel Byrne's awful rendition of Vic's signature tune 'My Way' (What else, for a Creator?), surely the most memorable cinematic representation of that standard since Sid Vicious mangled it in *Sid and Nancy*. It's an interesting moment because we can't be sure if Byrne is snarling remarks like "You're a paranoid schizophrenic" between the lyrics or whether we are finally seeing/hearing evidence of Vic's delusional psychosis.

The contribution of Byrne, who speaks in an unfathomable accent, is the most comic of the film. He makes a great foil for Vic's hired gun Jeff

Goldblum (my favorite performance among his credits so far), whose wry, schoolboyish looks suggest he is concealing some sly prank. He, Dreyfuss, and Byrne form the crown of a cast list that is irresistible, including the likes of Ellen Barkin, Diane Lane, Billy Idol, Rob Reiner, and Paul Anka. Rat Packers Sinatra, Martin, and Davis dominate the soundtrack. The title is an anagram of *Mad God Time*, highlighting Bishop's intention that his film was to be seen as an allegory.

MAHLER (1974) 115m. The eighth and last of Ken Russell's composer biographies (I think it's safe enough to discount *Lisztomania*), which I once walked seven miles to see as a teenager at a one-off screening. It's still as difficult to see in a theatre nowadays, but undoubtedly of interest to Russell fans. The film recaps the life of Austrian Jew Gustav Mahler (Robert Powell) while he takes one last Freudian train journey back to Vienna with his wife Alma (Georgina Hale). It doesn't reach the heights of other Russell opuses but is still more interesting than most slick productions you'll see in the mainstream. The main problem with it is that Mahler himself isn't that interesting and doesn't lead a particularly exceptional life. Granted, he did find fame and success as a conducter and became something of a *monstre sacre*, but the same could be said about a novelist, and the idea of watching someone writing a book for two hours doesn't appeal to me either. Another problem Russell has to contend with is Mahler's music – it doesn't have the instant appeal of other composers he has handled, and is an acquired taste to anyone unfamiliar with 20th century composition. Neither does it seem to choreograph well with Russell's images – it doesn't inspire me to buy the soundtrack, anyway, which I presume is part of the reason Russell wanted to make this film, i.e. to pay homage to an artist he admired while bringing his life and work to a mass audience with the same pop sensibilities he would use the following year in *Tommy*.

Russell gives his film visual impetus to keep his audience watching – apart from the framing device of the train, *Mahler* is made up almost wholly of dream sequences, fantasies, and offbeat set-pieces. But it all seems flat this time around. Maybe that's because many of its heavily symbolic, hallucinatory images are immediately followed by postscripts in which the characters explain to each other what we have just watched. However I can also see this as Russell's way of defusing accusations that he is being pretentious. The most jarring of these sequences is Mahler's conversion to Catholicism, filmed as if it were a silent comedy (Russell himself is a Catholic convert, which may explain his interest in this part of Mahler's life). As a stand-alone sequence it's a lot of fun, but it looks like it was dropped in from a different movie. *Mahler*'s preponderance with visuals also reminds us that Russell is more of a technical director than an actor's director. His characters all sound alike – it's obviously Russell dialogue that they're speaking. Hale, as Alma, has to switch from petulant to sweet to hardened to despairing, while Powell just looks like a gloomy guy in a hat. The logic behind Powell's saturnine performance is explained at the end, when we discover he has tonsillitis (a precursor to his death shortly after), but by then it's too late for us to really care.

Still, Russell has enthusiasm, and does well with a limited budget (instead of filming in Europe he once again returned to his favorite location, the Lake District). Mahler's daughter Anna, who was 70 at the time of the film's release, gave Russell permission to make his biography after initial reservations about what he'd done with Tchaikovsky in *The Music Lovers*.

MAIDSTONE (1970) 104m. In his third independently-produced movie in as many years, Norman Mailer must have had critics figuring he'd pushed his writing career aside to concentrate on film appearances. The Pulitzer-prize winning writer, who appears to fancy himself in *Maidstone* as a fire-breathing machismo guru, plays a celebrated film director named Norman Kingsley (Mailer's middle name), who is running for President while mking what may be his last masterpiece before either taking up office or being assassinated. The content and purpose of this film-within-the-film is just as incomprehensible as the film itself, but since the refraction of different realities is the guiding premise of *Maidstone*, it's supposedly excusable. The

problem with Mailer as director, besides having watched too much Godard in the 60s, is that he gives the impression of feeling single-handedly capable of re-inventing cinema. Instead, all he delivers is a lot of hand-held camera work, wild editing, and close-ups in which he spars with other actors (many of whom are non-professional) to impress upon them his own brand of genius, presumably in the guise of the fictional character he is playing. But where does Norman Kingsley end and Norman Mailer begin? A sense of humor or self-deprecation about *Maidstone* may have indicated whether the writer/director was parodying himself, at least, but played as straight as it is, performance and documentary become obfuscated and after 90 minutes likely to yield only the response 'will the real Norman Mailer please shut up?'. In the simplest terms, the film is just too pushy. Mailer doesn't embrace cinema; he attacks it. From the outset he warns the cast turning up to his cattle call that he will bully them to their limits, and at the conclusion he reflects that his approach to making the film is like that of a military campaign. Every conversation he has is confrontational, which may all be dynamic, but results in no emotional core and, unsurprisingly, no viewer connection.

The film's penultimate scene gathers the large cast upon a hillside where Mailer is now being himself – as opposed to playing himself – and explaining to everyone the slippages of reality he has been attempting with *Maidstone*. Undoubtedly, Mailer is articulate and expresses ideas in an infectiously bombastic manner, but when we realize he is explaining what he 'intends to do' with the not-too-remarkable film he has in fact already made and that we have already watched, we notice how big the gulf is between theory and practice. Finally, after an hour and a half of Mailer's rampant ego trip, actor Rip Torn attacks the director with a hammer, presumably on behalf of the audience. This remarkable closing scene is the main reason to see *Maidstone*. It comes after the hillside assembly, during which one scripted line (a plant by Torn) is snuck in for a payoff later: Mailer's idea was to let viewers figure that the movie had wrapped with everyone out of character reflecting on their film-making project, but then add a fillip where Torn, befuddled from the whole experience and unable to separate reality from fiction, attempts an assassination on Norman (Mailer) that characters in the movie were planning for Norman (Kingsley). The resulting brawl is a textbook example of When Improvisation Goes Bad, with the most memorable public ear-biting outside of the boxing ring and some genuinely unscripted reactions by a shrieking Mrs Mailer (#4 in a series of 6) and offspring (#2-6 in a series of 8). The irony is that this scene fits perfectly into Mailer's film-making philosophy, with the actors shakily attempting to continue the improv afterwards while obviously flustered by what had happened moments before (documentarian D.A. Pennebaker keeps the camera rolling throughout the whole thing). Just as ironically, it is only at a moment when Mailer is not in total control of his film that he is able to get the effect he wanted. Whether he got satisfaction is hard to tell (he did, after all, leave the scene in the movie), but when he returned to film-making with *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, 16 years later, the whole process was handled much more conventionally.

THE MAN IN THE MOON (1991) 99m. A simple story well told. When stripped down, it all appears so basic that you might wonder why veteran directors Robert Mulligan and Mark Rydell took it upon themselves to make it (Rydell produced). I would guess that Mulligan knew well enough to trust his film to the right actors, if he could find them – and he did. *The Man in the Moon* will probably be best known now for the debut of Reese Witherspoon, who impresses in her role as Dani, a 14-year old girl living with her family in rural Louisiana during the 50s. A long-absent family friend moves in nearby, allowing 17-year old Court (Jason London, also making his debut) to enter Dani's life. But it isn't just Dani: her older sister Maureen (Emily Warfield) has noticed him too.

It works in the film's favor to have the story of a young girl's first crush presented in a basic manner. The story opens, progresses and closes, and even though significant events have unfolded it's hard to tell if the girls' lives will be changed that dramatically. This is what I like most about *The Man in the Moon* – it's like a chapter from a book, self-contained in its own simplicity. There are no complications, subplots, or clutter to distract us. It

begins and ends with the girls on a front porch in the light of the full moon, suggesting that the story has completed its 'cycle' (everything takes place within a month). It also allows its characters leisure to breathe, walk, and talk so naturally that we don't focus on the acting. Witherspoon at first appears to be a teenybopper, then perhaps a 'wild child', but is perfectly at ease dressed either tomboyishly or in skirts. Sam Waterston, as the father of the girls, initially appears to be a traditionally strict father of the 50s, but reveals more elements to his character as the film progresses. Look at the nuances that slip through so effortlessly – for example, the priceless, dismissive look on Witherspoon's face when she first meets London outside her home. These are blink-and-you'll-miss-them moments, too ephemeral to be written into screenplays or catalogued in critiques. True, there are a few unsteady turns – the opening dialogue that explains the film's title (which really has very little to do with what follows), and some scenes that verge on melodrama – but they do not detract from the overall charm of the piece.

There's also another level that the film works on, and one which I believe is true of many features of the last decade that have showcased the talents of young, up-and-coming performers. As is the case with so many of her contemporaries, Witherspoon has graduated from the simple pleasures of her debut and moved on to harder, darker, and decidedly more adult material. It's a common occurrence: young stars don't want to be trapped in PG-features when they can stretch themselves as 'serious' actors. So while the nostalgia of *The Man in the Moon* isn't troweled on too thickly, the sight of a smart, ponytailed, wide-eyed Witherspoon automatically ensures that it will make itself an irretrievable memento. Given the film's subject matter of first love, lost love, and coming-of-age, this all conspires to make perfect sense.

MANIAC (1934) 52m. In just the same way that the development of the horror movie, the Western, or the historical epic can be charted on screen, so too can the lineage (I don't dare call it a development) of Z-grade flops be traced back as early as this mess from director Dwain Esper. You have to wonder if the actors, writers, and directors of such laughable 50s efforts as *Plan 9 From Outer Space* and *Robot Monster* ever saw Esper's film and thought "If I ever make a movie, it'll never be as bad as this!" Did they learn from these mistakes? Of course not. History repeats itself, the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce; and there was never any shortage of hilariously awful Trash movies in the years to follow *Maniac*.

Like all good Z-graders, *Maniac* has its roots in Science Fiction and Horror: psychotic Dr Meirschultz (Horace Carpenter, complete with the obligatory Triumphant Mad Scientist Laugh) and equally psychotic assistant Maxwell (Bill Woods) rob a morgue to revive a corpse using a heart transplant and injections of a reanimation drug. Their relationship takes a turn on the downside when Meirschultz asks Maxwell to shoot himself. For the remainder of the film, Maxwell adopts the role of his former mentor, accidentally turning one of his patients into yet-another-psychotic along the way, and plotting the demise of two interfering women by giving them the ol' psycho treatment as well. There is much evil laughter, eye-rolling and hands grasping at the air to assure us that these people are sufficiently manic enough to warrant the film's title. Esper keeps inserting intertitles that are supposed to pass his film off as a socially informative 'roadshow' picture (as he was more accustomed to churning out) but instead lump together to present Maxwell as a Paretic Manic-Depressive Paranoid Schizophrenic! That smorgasbord of psychosis might explain his terrible performance in the movie, but doesn't excuse everyone else in the cast. It's impressive how every new player brings their own bad acting technique to the picture (amateur, wooden, ham) and for a while the Worst Actor award is even money among the cast, until Ted Andrews steals the show as a gibbering lunatic and chews as much scenery as possible within his allotted few minutes of screen time (I'm sure his Mom thought he was great). It's easy to make fun of Andrews' histrionics, but check out John Barrymore's similar routine in the 1920 version of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and you may wonder how laughable many of these silent films would have been if they weren't stripped of sound. In fact *Maniac* looks a lot like a silent movie, leaving us to wonder if Esper might have gotten away with a

less ridiculous production if he had made it before the sound revolution some years earlier.

As is the case with all films of this type, the less you know about its absurdities beforehand, the better – it would spoil things to recite memorable lines or relate the shambolic plot. Although the narrative looks like it has been written in one shot and without any revision, it does appear that the screenwriter (aka Mrs Esper) has spun her tale around horror classics. The quotes from Poe are obvious enough, but *Maniac* also mixes Frankenstein, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and The Body Snatcher. The fact that these references are overwhelmed by the film's own loopy atmosphere is proof enough that it is more than the sum of its parts. Or, as is more likely the case, less.

MARS ATTACKS! (1996) 102m. I've often looked forward to Tim Burton's credit sequences ever since the delirious, operatic opening moments for *Batman Returns.* On this score, *Mars Attacks!* doesn't disappoint – that he can make so much of so little (namely, hokey-looking saucers flying through space) is ample proof of his talent. Unfortunately, it's so tantalizingly powerful that – for a while at least – the rest of his film appears to suffer by comparison.

The story, inspired by a series of trading cards (the look of which is recreated faithfully in the film), is so by-the-numbers that it hardly seems worth recounting here, but for the record: A fleet of alien spacecraft take up position in orbit around the Earth. The US president (Jack Nicholson), mistakenly persuaded of their peaceful intentions, finds himself running for cover as the White House and most of the surrounding neighborhood are suddenly laid to waste. He isn't the only one – the storyline jumps between several characters in different locations, all faced with the same crisis. If you think this sounds like the same plot used in the same year's summer hit *Independence Day*, you're right – and this provides another rather troublesome area of comparison. *ID4* was a blockbuster of a movie, a huge, global rocket-ride with big effects that netted big box office. *Mars Attacks!* is deliberately cheesy, a skewed marriage of mainstream pop and Burton's own eccentricity. But Burton's film has a significant saving grace: it is directed by Tim Burton. While the aliens of *ID4* leveled entire cities with anonymous blasts from their huge starships, the Martians of *Mars Attacks!* work on a more. . . *personal* level. It is at the point when the Martians make their first appearance that the story begins to pick up: they are hilarious, but also provide the film with an unexpectedly vicious edge. Under any other circumstances, Burton's grotesqueries would come across as merely violent (I don't doubt that many younger viewers in theaters gathered enough material for a few week's worth of nightmares) but his idiosyncratic goofiness still presides.

It's very likely that *Mars Attacks!* won't be as funny as some moviegoers would hope, nor provide the big-budget sci-fi thrills that others may expect. The main reason to see it is to behold Burton at work, once again re-inventing the pop culture that defined his childhood. And of course, there is the appropriately stellar cast he has assembled – as if he didn't have enough to contend with while wreaking havoc on the planet he also has to juggle enough screen time for the likes of Nicholson, Pierce Brosnan, Glenn Close, Annette Bening, Rod Steiger, Michael J. Fox, Sarah Jessica Parker, Martin Short, Danny de Vito, Tom Jones, Natalie Portman, and Joe Don Baker. It's amazing that the Martians even get a look-in – but they'll still be who you remember most afterwards. Incidentally, this film marks the second use of Jones' hit "It's Not Unusual" in a Burton film.

MATINEE (1993) 99m. Joe Dante's most personal film is also one of his best. After a hilarious opening sequence featuring a direct copy of the cinema promos made by director-producer William Castle in the late 50s/early 60s, Dante settles into areas of childhood nostalgia that's only been hinted at in his previous work. He's a good choice of director for this project: it's plain to see that he has always loved movies (his films have more movie in-jokes than any other director I can think of) and he was lucky enough to see Castle films with the gimmicks 'Emergo' (*House on Haunted Hill*), 'Percepto' (*The Tingler*) and 'Illusion-O' (*13 Ghosts*) when he was an impressionable young movie buff.

Matinee is set in Florida during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and begins when teenager Gene (Simon Fenton) witnesses two sober warnings about atomic weapons. The first is from movie producer Lawrence

Woolsey (John Goodman) in a Saturday matinee trailer, the second is from John F. Kennedy on live television. One is obviously far-fetched, the other deadly serious, but what's a boy to think? Appropriately, Gene's younger brother believes in both. The reality/unreality of these two scenarios reaches a middle ground during Gene's third warning, when he is told that his school's nuclear attack drill (ever seen those old 'Duck and Cover' educational films?) is a sham. It's just the right climate for Woolsey's new monster movie, and he duly arrives in town with his entourage in tow, for who can separate the current real-life nuclear horrors from his skilfully orchestrated ones? Woolsey's horror show boasts a barrage of audience-participation effects, and by the end not even the adults (including theater owner Robert Picardo) can differentiate between the gimmicks and the apocalypse.

Dante's agenda with this film is clear: he wants to show what going to the movies *really* used to be like before the shopping malls and the cineplexes took over. Fittingly, *Matinee*'s second half is set in and around the cinema, cross-cutting between the monster movie (itself a very funny spoof of 50s nuclear-mutant horror flicks) and the action behind the scenes. Charles Haas' clever script ties up this package so neatly that you'll reach the final credits feeling completely satisfied – it even manages to include what surely must have been every teenage boy's fantasy during the Cold War, i.e. the prospect of being trapped for months in a fallout shelter with a would-be girlfriend. Unfortunately, the script falters during a hackneyed 'child-in-peril' climax, which is dispensed with so briefly that there's almost no justification for its inclusion. It's a bad move for two reasons: firstly, it is the sort of thing you'd expect to find in a kid's movie, which *Matinee* is not; secondly, it introduces a false note of real danger – the underlying theme of *Matinee* is to watch how our minds surrender voluntarily or instinctively to larger-than-life fears. Contrast this scene to the film's understated final shot, which hints at the war in Vietnam and conveys realistic menace a lot more effectively. What's great about *Matinee* is how it introduces fantastic elements to an ordinary setting and weaves them so invisibly into the story, so it's ironic that the only 'real' dangerous moment in the film is also its only unrealistic one.

The era celebrated in this film happened before my time, but I still have enough memories of my own journeys to the local cinema (whether it was to see old prints of Tarzan or Ray Harryhausen films) to recognize that for a while there was a golden age of movie-going for young audiences. The Saturday matinees were full of kids who were only half-interested in the show; foodstuffs were routinely thrown; and cheers sometimes punctuated the action on screen. If only I'd seen a skeleton sliding on a wire or been given electric shocks in my seat, my childhood would have been made complete. For now, like many other viewers, I'll have to make do with Dante's own affectionate, good-humored memoir.

MIAMI BLUES (1990) 97m. In George Armitage's adaptation of Charles Willeford's novel, Alec Baldwin plays a wanted ex-con whose devil-may-care attitude surprisingly hasn't yet led to his capture. Upon reaching Miami he meets up with ingénue hooker Jennifer Jason Leigh, adopts her as his fiancée, and sets about supplementing their income with a string of petty thefts. Upon acquiring the cuffs, badge, and other accouterments of cop Fred Ward, he discovers that larceny has never been easier. This disarming black comedy-drama stands out among others in the pack because its offbeat plot turns make it hard for the viewer to match a rhythm to it. The sex scene we all expect comes earlier than anticipated, the initial meeting between Baldwin and Ward isn't how we imagine it, and Baldwin, the prime proponent of the film's randomness, does not move to a predictable plan – he is psychotic enough to kill on a whim, yet never rises above purse-snatching and break-ins. What's interesting is that while Baldwin is the cause of so much random violence towards others, he is at the same time the victim of spontaneous, violent acts. It's not surprising that his dismissive attitude treats everything as if it were a game: Baldwin roleplays confrontations with himself (a la *Taxi Driver*), lies continually, plays cop as soon as he gets hold of a badge, and plays house with Leigh, whom he tells "Call me Junior". It's an

appropriate nickname, and Leigh is a suitably ditzy companion for him.

In one picture-postcard scene, Baldwin and Leigh watch couples happily playing with a Frisbee against a Miami beach sunset. No sooner have the two of them set up house than they are playing with their own Frisbee on the front lawn. When Leigh, with an older and wiser glint in her eye, tosses the toy aside at the film's conclusion, she, for one, knows that the dream is over. Unlike Junior, Ward, world-weary and only one week from retirement, manages to finish what he started. Ward and his world are mundane and orderly, and the antithesis of Baldwin, a character out of sync in a world out of sync. While screenplay convention dictates that the cop and his quarry remain separate for the bulk of the film we nevertheless feel a connection between them. Their dinner together, in which Baldwin is cagey but jumpy, and Ward is either dumb or just playing dumb, is a highlight. Baldwin's character is always interesting (how many films have you seen where the criminal accompanies a house burglary with an improvisational haiku?), Leigh somehow manages to play superficiality with a sense of depth, and Ward fits into his role effortlessly. Weird coincidence: Baldwin steals a badge and passes himself off as "Sergeant Mosely". Two years earlier in *Midnight Run*, Robert De Niro steals a badge as passes himself off as "Agent Mosely". Has anybody else noticed this?

MIRACLE MILE (1989) 87m. Right from the pre-credits opening you'll assume from Anthony Edwards' retrospective narration that you are about to see a quirky, affectionate romance. But by the time *Miracle Mile* has ended you'll have realized that this is a cunning manuever by writer/director Steve de Jarnatt to plant a subconscious sense of reassurance in the minds of the audience, one that will prevent most people watching from believing that the worst can happen, right up until the very end.

Ten minutes into the story, Edwards (as Harry Washello) is late for his second date with new romance Mare Winningham. While waiting on a street corner in the early hours of the morning he answers a phone ringing in a public booth. To describe the events that happen afterward would undermine the surprising developments that Jarnatt has in store, but suffice to say that Harry is informed that inadvertently launched nuclear warheads are winging their way towards his sleeping city. Throughout the rest of the film we watch in frustration as Harry gets swept up in the circumstances he sets snowballing into motion. As in our worst nightmares, he never gains control; he can't seem to get beyond the same limited geographical area; he (like the audience) is deprived of essential knowledge – we are never sure whether the missile scare is real, a hoax, or literally his nightmare.

Jarnatt juggles humor and action with ease, but it is at the moment when the film's nightmare logic spills over into the daylight, where it shouldn't belong, that *Miracle Mile* becomes just plain chilling. We watch his portrayal of suppressed panic, which breaks at different levels for different people, and wonder if we would fare any better in a similar situation. Jarnatt and cinematographer Theo Van de Sande create widescreen images that will stick with you, including an unforgettable final shot viewed from within a helicopter cockpit. *Miracle Mile* was Jarnatt's pet project after *Cherry 2000*, but was held over for release and undeservedly overlooked. It's a film that looks good on a big screen, with a characteristically persistent score by Tangerine Dream. For the sharp-eyed: Jarnatt plants a clue pointing toward the conclusion of the film by inserting a shot of study notes for Thomas Pynchon's book *Gravity's Rainbow*.

MISSION TO MARS (2000) 112m. I'm surprised at the hostile reaction that Brian De Palma's first foray into Sci-Fi received from some critics. Undeniably, *Mission to Mars* is patchy, but that's nothing new. De Palma's track record is notorious for this kind of spasmodic final product (his most unified film *The Untouchables* being an exception). Even his biggest critical flop, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is still okay as a film – it's only when its compared to Tom Wolfe's terrific book that it fails. It's these comparative elements that may have irked many a reviewer of *Mission to Mars*. The most obvious homage/ripoff (take your pick) is *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and De Palma's beautiful visuals (of

artificial gravity; the seemingly effortless, assured camerawork in the spacecraft; the figures in Martian orbit) evoke a sense of wonder and easily hold their own against that classic. Conceptwise, it's another matter. Science Fiction has been all but milked dry (the last New Big Thing was William Gibson's notions of cyberspace), and when *Mission to Mars* makes it clear that it's heading towards a revelatory punchline it can only mean trouble. There's very little left that's new, and I can see the film's payoff causing SF buffs to roll their eyes and say "they did this in (insert name of book / film / *Twilight Zone* episode) already!".

That leaves us with structure, and De Palma once again shows us that he is a craftsman of bravura set-pieces. It also reminds us that a lot of the stuff between those set-pieces doesn't usually hold together so well, and in *Mission to Mars* you can start picking at exact moments where the seams start to show. On the negative side: the opening earthbound scenes appear to have been written from 'The Screenwriter's Guide to Expository Dialogue' (it's a made-up title; don't look for it); the image of the alien at the end is embarrassingly twee; De Palma doesn't really know how to use music effectively in emotional/dramatic scenes (he seems to have used Ennio Morricone's score in much the same way that he overstated his Pino Donaggio scores to kitschy effect in his early thrillers); and the storyline is cut into two uneven halves, the first being realistic, the second being fantastic.

I don't necessarily regard this last criticism as a failing point; in fact I enjoy scripts that aren't straitjacketed into 'arcs' or formulas. Also – and in spite of those weak opening scenes – the tone of this film is unlike any other De Palma has made. For once he presents his characters as if they were more than scripted pawns in a screenplay: Tim Robbins, Connie Nielsen, Gary Sinese, and Jerry O'Connell form an easy, natural bond as astronauts who have grown to know each other over many missions. And this time, when someone dies in a De Palma film, it resonates. For my money, the pluses in *Mission to Mars* easily outweigh the minuses. It looks fabulous on a big screen, plays out some great sequences, and has a genial mix of science and fiction. Granted, there are several little stupid moments scattered throughout, but this at least may provide some post-screening entertainment if you see it with a group of friends (my vote for The Stupidest Bit is that dumb scene where the rescue team pauses to unearth the flag and replant it…personally my priority upon reaching the objective of a six-month mission would have been to get inside the damned ship first).

It comes back to what I've always advocated – that the less you know about a film beforehand the better. My guess is that the reviewers who have carped most about De Palma's film will be those who either felt he wasn't equipped to work in the genre in the first place, or those who were led to expect an entirely different experience. Another *2001*? Not likely; there will hardly be another of those in our lifetime. *Close Encounters*? No, that was pointedly one director's personal vision. *Apollo 13*? No, that was fact, and this is fiction. *Mission to Mars* is….well, it's just *Mission to Mars* and that's all there is to it. In the meantime, and until studios realize that hype is the worst enemy a movie can have, you would be best to take a leaf out of Alexander Pope's book and maintain a little ignorance before you buy your tickets. Or to put it another way: the best way to watch a film is in the dark.

MISTER JOHNSON (1991) 97m. It took director Bruce Beresford 25 years to get this project off the ground. It's an intelligent, sensitively-handled drama (based on Joyce Carey's novel) set in West Africa during the days of Britain's empire-building. It features a standout performance by Maynard Eziashi in the title role as an Nigerian clerk working for the British government in the village of Fada. Johnson's eagerness to be accepted as an English gentleman by his country's new landlords is a phenomenon observable in several colonized provinces throughout history. It's also the kind of compromise that can only lead to misunderstanding from both cultures. The irrepressible, entrepreneurial Johnson is a dreamer, who thinks big enough not only to see himself as a rich, respectable businessman, but also to embrace the ambition of his district officer (Pierce Brosnan) to build a 100-mile road. The completion of the road, which will make the Empire's 'civilizing' processes even easier, tells us that the end of the village's (and Africa's)

innocence is nigh. It's the kind of imperialism that we instinctively blame for Johnson's downfall – but looking back we can see that the real villain of the film is commerce. Every scrape that Johnson gets into is less a result of cultural clash than simple mismanagement of money, and it's not only the British that he gets into trouble with. The opportunistic, ingenuous Johnson is just the type we would expect to fall foul of the law, whether native or British, as a matter of course.

Beresford seems to be drawn to assignments set in desolate landscapes, and here he convincingly transports us to the 1923 colonies. As would be expected, he gets solid performances from Eziashi, Brosnan (whose repressed character demands he be underplayed), and Edward Woodward as a local store owner (who I find more memorable here than in Beresford's *Breaker Morant*). There are several scenes you'll react to on an emotional level – the quietly triumphant completion of the road and the unforgettable final scene are the two most notable examples. The dusky photography by Peter James suits the film perfectly. *Mister Johnson* is definitely worth your time – critics applauded it even though it sank without a trace at the box office. If it wasn't for the success of his previous film, *Driving Miss Daisy*, Beresford may never have been able to convince backers to produce a film featuring an unknown black actor in the lead role. Incidentally, this must be the only film I've seen set in an African village that doesn't wind up with someone's house burning down.

THE MOLLY MAGUIRES (1970) 124m.

Molly Maguire was a peasant girl in 17th century Ireland, who supposedly led an uprising against rent collectors, but this film is set in 1876, where we find Detective James McParlane (Richard Harris) being sent to a Pennsylvania mining community largely composed of Irish immigrants, in order to infiltrate a secret society known as the Hibernians. He knows that within the society is an elite band of activists, who have called themselves the Molly Maguires, intent on sabotaging the mines in order to force the owners to upgrade their working and living conditions.

You'll be nudged one way and pushed the rest throughout much of this film, as it is difficult to know who to sympathize with. We never really 'experience' the terrible work conditions or poverty that the Maguires are fighting against. The closest we come to this is during one scene at a wake, where an elderly miner's life looks to have been wasted after 42 years in the mines. But by and large, the community doesn't appear too badly off (although they could do with a decent football field). On the other hand, it's difficult to stick up for Harris' character because of the deceitful maneuvers and outright lying he does to get the trust of the Maguires' leader. Furthermore, both the Maguires and the peelers (the local constabulary) use murder as a means of getting their point across. And just to confound things, the protagonists are played by charismatic actors (Harris and Sean Connery), which we would like to see both win. Is there any chance they will team up by the film's end?

The most interesting element of the film is probably at what point viewers will decide which side deserves their sympathy. The deciding factor may be that Harris is motivated only for his own ends while Connery's actions are more political and altruistic. What unites both is that their motivations are the same – to find a better way of living than is offered by the mines. *The Molly Maguires* walks an intriguing tightrope. You'll find yourself hoping that Harris' coolly-played ruse doesn't get discovered. But then, everyone else seems to be plotting too – the community, innocuous on the surface, harbors another community that is literally underground. Even the building interiors are lit as if they were mines. Both Harris and Connery play their roles wonderfully, though Samantha Eggar, who shares above-title billing with them, seems included only to provide Harris with an excuse to reveal his thoughts. The direction by Martin Ritt is effectively unobtrusive, complemented by Henry Mancini's wistful, folk-influenced score.

THE MONITORS (1969) 92m. The opening titles for this Sci-Fi satire look like the credits of a TV series, which might make you think that television director Jack Shea was originally approached to make a pilot instead of a theatrical

feature. Maybe that's where it should have belonged. Not really funny enough to succeed as a comedy, and too casual with its concept to function as SF, *The Monitors* is remembered as one of a handful of counter-cultural oddities bankrolled by Hollywood studios in the late 60s. Based on a novel by Keith Laumer, it's set in a time (presumably near-future) where the Earth has been visited and presided over by an alien force that look like the bowler-hatted figures in Magritte paintings. USAF pilot Harry Jordan (Guy Stockwell) is recruited firstly by an underground resistance force to drop a new implosion bomb on the Monitors' HQ, and then by the Monitors themselves to become a student in one of their education centers. By the end of the film he doesn't seem to have gotten much out of either experience, and neither have we.

The film's director, writer and actors are all strictly B-list (they could have at least gotten a half-decent 60s pop group to provide a kitsch energy to the proceedings), so it's not surprising that the intriguing ideas in the story don't get full justice. One of the film's problems is that it doesn't explain who the Monitors are, where they came from, or why they are here (other than to improve the lot of humanity, which is just too altruistic to be regarded with anything other than suspicion), leaving us on unsure footing from the outset. Another problem is that we can't see why anybody – let alone a whole planet – would simply roll over and let the Monitors take charge. Even though their impassive manner suggests confidence in an assumed invulnerability, they enforce their rule largely by requesting co-operation ("Reason, not force"). In fact, all that they have to outwardly separate themselves from Earthlings is a dinky paralyzing aerosol, and even this can be disarmed from them without much trouble.

The Monitors seems like a missed opportunity, but at least it might make you question what you're watching. The most interesting point the film has to make is that it doesn't matter if alien occupants turn out to be benevolent and improve the quality of life because it's in the nature of people to rebel anyway. Despite constant reassurances that the Monitors mean only good will (amusing endorsements and pro-Monitor commercial jingles play back-to-back on television) we still can't trust them ("Yeah, they're great, but I still hate 'em," Jordan remarks offhandedly). What really gets us suspicious is the constant broadcasts assuring us that 'The Monitors are your friends', which smacks too much of brainwashing. All through the film you'll be waiting for the mask to drop and reveal the Monitors as insidious dictators – after all, there's no such thing as a free lunch. I like the way the film effortlessly plays with our sense of mistrust by openly speaking the truth and expecting us to automatically reject it, but this becomes another unfulfilled element of anticipation by the story's end. From the film's opening we're expecting more than it will deliver. Perhaps the shift to comedy was to compensate for the fact that the science-fictional element of the story was under-represented. This means that the characters dress up in all manner of getups and dash from one place to another (there's even a food fight) to keep the thing rolling along, but only *F Troop*'s Larry Storch seems comfortable with this sort of mugging, and even he is upstaged by Alan Arkin's underplayed cameo in one of the TV spots. If you saw this as an impressionable kid, then you might feel unfulfilled revisiting it as an adult. As far as nostalgia goes, bowler hats and weirdness are best left to 1960s TV show *The Avengers*.

MONKEY SHINES (1988) 113m. George A. Romero wrote and directed this adaptation of Michael Stewart's novel at a time when the renewed 'horror wave' of the 80s was in its ebb. It has an interesting hook: a quadriplegic, Allan Mann (Jason Beghe), is assigned a trained capuchin monkey by the name of Ella to help him with simple routines that he is incapable of. Ella, however, is the star pupil of a dubious laboratory experiment by Geoffrey Fisher (John Pankow), who also happens to be one of Allan's friends. By the time the finale rolls around, we're left with a dangerous situation: after years of evolution, who has the upper hand – an intelligent, angry monkey, or an intelligent, incapacitated human? Romero must have enjoyed choreographing this final sequence – it was pretty creepy when I saw it the first time in a cinema. *Monkey Shines* doesn't hold up as well in repeat viewings, but to be fair, this is true of most horror films. There are shocks (mostly of the leaping-monkey variety) and deaths, which are

surprisingly bloodless. It's safe to guess that after the excess of his zombie films, Romero wanted to prove he could make a horror picture without gore.

The addition of a science-fiction element (Geoffrey has injected Ella with a telepathy-inducing serum), which provides a kind of mind-meld between man and monkey, is awkwardly posed to justify Ella's behavior. While it's reasonable to expect Ella to feel anger over incidents in which Allan is mistreated, it's another thing to accept her jealousy over his new girlfriend (Kate McNeil). But if you can believe a car getting jealous over its owner's girlfriend, as in 1983's *Christine*, then a monkey shouldn't be too much of a stretch. The story could have done more with the notion that the evolutionary gap is narrower than we would care to think, but instead only hints that Ella/Allan are two sides of the same coin, and while their roles never completely reverse, it comes close. The newly-paralyzed Allan comes to realize that he must not only regain his worth as an individual (Mann) but also his status as a human being (man). And Ella is a worthy adversary – it's chilling seeing her hiss and hyperventilate as her intelligent eyes fix upon Allan's face. The cards are stacked against her, however – we know from the outset that she is the villain of the piece, so have no inclination to enjoy her cute antics in the earlier moments of the film. At least she doesn't ham it up as much as Allan's nurse and mother, who give nagging, one-note performances, just to provide Ella with a couple of targets and ensure, in the eyes of the audience, that they 'deserve' what's coming to them. Romero juggles disparate elements and takes some risks (a sex scene, in which Allan can move only his head, is either erotic or laughable, depending on your point of view), but one gets the feeling that he'd be more at home with a couple of shotguns and a bucket of viscera. Still, as a pint-sized flipside to King Kong, Ella has her place among movie monsters. I've often wondered if the title *Monkey Shines* doubled as a jokey reference to Stephen King's term for telepathy, *The Shining*.

THE MONOLITH MONSTERS (1957) 77m.

The only movie about killer rocks you'll ever see. It's hard to believe such a story pitch was ever greenlighted, and just as unbelievable to see that it actually works. The concept is similar to that of J.G. Ballard's creepy novel 'The Crystal World', and its execution follows the pattern of other more well-known genre films of the time: it has an ominous opening narration (usually a prerequisite for these films); a desert setting (always popular, since this gives the monster more time to roam about killing wayfarers before it reaches the already-alerted community nearby); a hero who works for the government with some military/scientific background; his girlfriend (subject for possible paper: Why are the leading couples never married in 1950s SF/horror films?); a quasi-scientific rationale for the monster's creation; and a race against time to find a means of defeating the invading creature. Where it differs most dramatically is the choice of monster. It falls back on that SF staple, the silicon-based lifeform – if it is a lifeform. The monoliths of the title are spires of obsidian, neither living nor dead. Their only means of movement is to grow into spindly obelisks which then splinter and topple forward. This is one of the few monster movies you'll see where you feel nothing whatsoever towards the monster (e.g. pity, revulsion, admiration, fear), but perversely it is this complete lack of connection that makes the monsters more threatening – they are truly alien.

The Monolith Monsters manages to maintain interest despite sticking to formula – the effects are good (and original); the dialogue isn't embarrassing (there's only one silly line, when hero Grant Williams remarks "You're absolutely right, it's ridiculous - but that's what they said about the wheel when someone first thought of it."); and the time element is used effectively to convey a sense of menace. My favorite moment is when Williams and his colleague are alone in a workshop trying to determine the cause of the rocks' growth, unaware that it is starting on a major scale all around them. It's too bad the film didn't work more of these ironies into the story – for example, the fact that the technology they're using to find a way to defeat the monsters is all mineral-based (at one point an early victim is kept alive for a while in an iron lung!). The science is just as specious here as in other genre pics, but at least this time around it sounds convincing. Pretty much overlooked, but just as deserving of

attention as some of those other SF 'classics' that were around at the time.

MOTORAMA (1991) 90m. This pre-packaged cult item was written by Joseph Minion, whose first produced screenplay was *After Hours.* It has the feel of an earlier project that he'd spent previous years ironing out. A ten-year old boy named Gus (Jordan Christopher Michael) steals a Mustang and drives through an imaginary America collecting cards for a game called Motorama, meeting various eccentric characters along the way and winding up in all sorts of trouble. I like to imagine *Motorama* coming from the point of view of a boy in the back seat of a car during a long family trip, gazing out of the window at the empty landscape and having daydreams which are interspersed by pit stops at gas stations and diners. Everything that happens in this film is possible (and if you don't believe a ten-year old can steal a car then I dare you to leave one parked outside a playground with the keys in the ignition) but that doesn't by necessity make any of it believable. So it's neither real or unreal and too self-aware to be effectively surreal. Is there anything left?

The best way to watch *Motorama* is to think of it as an alternate-universe story. Minion tells us as much by creating mythical States and a non-existent game as the story's framework. This information isn't revealed to us from the outset, however, and I'm not sure if that's a wise move. The first half hour may be irritating to some viewers ("Can't anyone see that this guy is just a kid?? Are they blind, or stupid, or what?") and the characters Gus encounters are phoney: he doesn't meet people, just guest stars. It's a great supporting cast (Robert Picardo, Mary Woronov, Jack Nance, Michael J. Pollard, Meat Loaf, Drew Barrymore and Dick Miller, to name a few) but because they're all veterans of offbeat/cult films we expect them to be weird before they even open their mouths. It's OK once we figure out that *Motorama* exists in its own universe, but until then it seems that Minion is trying too hard to show us how 'out there' his story is. The point where it turns around, for me at least, is when Gus unexpectedly fouls up in the middle of one of his rip-off stunts and we realize that he's not just some wise-ass smart kid who is going to run rings around all the adults he meets. In a film where extreme situations are treated lightly, it's surprising to find a scene mid-way through the story that has consequences.

The character of Gus is a difficult one to fall in step with. Jordan Christopher Michael is neither appealing nor obnoxious in the role and *Motorama* is not a film for kids, so he is expected to act and talk like an adult – so much so that you begin to think that the part of Gus could just as easily be played by an adult. So why make the central character ten years old? He's too savvy for this road trip to be treated as a learning exercise and is resourceful enough to get along without the support of adults (mostly, they're only a hindrance). The only 'juvenile' element of his character is his obsession to collect game cards. The decision to make Gus ten years old makes some sense in the final scenes of the film, which indicate that the alternate universe idea has been expanded into an alternate future. Instead of a drowning man seeing his life flash before his eyes, a drowning boy sees his future flash before his eyes and the opportunity to change it has been implanted in his mind. At any rate, Gus's life seems predestined. The open road, a Mustang, and a gas-station game called Motorama: these all point the direction his life is to take. And with a name like Gus, you'd pretty much expect him to wind up a pump jockey. It's a future that would suit him fine – after all, consider the alternatives we've been witness to in the previous hour and a half. As if to prove that life imitates art, real Motorama game cards were issued to promote the film, which in turn spawned their own cult of collectors.

MOULIN ROUGE (2001) 126m. There's a windmill that keeps popping up in *Moulin Rouge* more often than it should, decked out with pretty lights, turning around in circles and going nowhere. It's probably as good a metaphor for *Moulin Rouge* as any, although I'm tempted to think that director Baz Luhrmann originally intended its frequent inclusion as a jokey aside to the Quixotic nature of his brash new undertaking. You will either love or hate *Moulin Rouge*, or possibly both. There's much that is wonderful and dynamic, and just as much that is irritating or hackneyed. There's certainly not much in the storyline: Ewan McGregor plays a would-be

bohemian writer visiting Paris at the turn of the 20th century, where he becomes besotted with Satine (Nicole Kidman), the star attraction of the infamous Moulin Rouge nightclub. The fate of the nightclub is in the hands of an unscrupulous Duke (Richard Roxburgh) who also has his eye on Satine and will brook no competition from the lovesick McGregor.

It took me a while to figure out exactly what Luhrmann was trying to do with *Moulin Rouge*. It's a natural, if predictable, progression from his previous two films *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romeo + Juliet* but at first glance seeks only to amplify them. It wasn't until the melodrama of the film's final reel that I remembered its great opening credits, and realized that *Moulin Rouge* is intended to be a silent film – with music. Luhrmann, who I suspect would be quite pleased to become heir apparent to the throne of Postmodern Cinema, throws every reference, in-joke and quotation imaginable into what he determines to be the 21st Century version of the Musical, a genre that was pretty much defunct after the 60s. It would not suit the viewing sensibilities of modern audiences to play the story straight, as would have been done in the days of Judy Garland or Gene Kelly, so instead Luhrmann chooses to be campy and flippant. This makes the film great fun, but also repeats the inconsistency of his previous *Romeo + Juliet*: *Moulin Rouge* immerses us in a totally artificial (i.e. distinctly cinematic) world with over-the-top characters and then expects us to feel genuine emotion for them at the end simply by descending into pathos.

The death scene, a less successful rehash of *R+J*, is tiresome, but not as tiresome as the film's other patent flaw. Luhrmann is a talented director with a wayward sense of humor, but in *Moulin Rouge* he has only one joke and it is repeated *ad nauseam.* Worse, it is that laziest recourse of humor, the anachronism joke. It first happens a few minutes into the film when Ewan McGregor bursts into a rendition of 'The Sound of Music'. It's a forgivable gag when it occurs, because it points out to us the direction the rest of the movie is heading. Twenty minutes later, when it becomes apparent that the characters are not going to stop quoting song lyrics as if they were prose, the joke has worn thin (and reminds us that Luhrmann had a better writer for his earlier picture!). It also raises some confusion – there is a specific audience that will be of the right age to recognize the quotes (mostly from 1970s tunes) so the spoofy nature of the dialogue will be lost on many viewers. It's one thing to have Prince's 'When Doves Cry' reformatted for choirboys in *Romeo + Juliet*, but another to have McGregor and Kidman spouting Bernie Taupin lyrics as if they were poetry and talking in conversations made up entirely of lines from Jennifer Warnes, David Bowie, The Sweet, Wings, and other artists. This might be the stuff of Postmodernism but it's also a depressing reminder that a number of new film-makers are cannibalistic: they don't make movies based on books any more, they make movies based on other movies. Just to show how intertextual Luhrmann gets, Kidman's opening scene starts with her belting out 'Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend', which is abruptly interrupted by a phrase from Madonna's 'Material Girl'. Why? Because the original Madonna video clip was itself a parody of the 'Diamonds' number from the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. At this stage Luhrmann isn't even making a movie based on a movie, but a movie based on a film clip based on a movie. In the end, *Moulin Rouge* is left strutting its stuff like a Frankenstein monster covered in glitter.

Despite this pot-pourri approach, *Moulin Rouge* still manages to be refreshing and original. This doesn't mean it's an original musical – the songs are well-known pop tunes that have been incorporated, mostly for humorous effect, into the storyline. I don't have any complaint with this because it wasn't uncommon for musicals of the past to be made in a similar style, with tunes cobbled together from the likes of Gershwin, Porter and Berlin to ensure good box-office – even the classic *Singing in the Rain* is made up of songs taken from other films. When it comes down to the bottom line, only one question needs to be asked: is this film worth seeing? The answer is yes. The high points outnumber the flaws (or, more likely, overwhelm them) and it is a gloriously cinematic spectacle which deserves to be seen and especially heard in a theater. It outdoes everything Luhrmann has done to date, and while it may not be as cohesive as his earlier work it at least seems to have been the film he has always wanted to make, the finale of a 'Red Curtain' trilogy. Besides, anything

featuring a cameo of pop princess Kylie Minogue as a hallucinatory green fairy has got to be worth checking out.

MR FORBUSH AND THE PENGUINS (1971) 101m. You would be excused, while watching this movie, for thinking that some film studio had decided to rework stock documentary footage into a fictional narrative, but in fact *Mr Forbush and the Penguins* was adapted from a novel by New Zealand writer Graham Billing, who had based the book on his own experiences as a journalist in the Antarctic. It's a bit of a patchwork effort, with three directors behind the camera and a screenplay by playwright Anthony Shaffer, whose preferred genre was murder mysteries.

John Hurt plays Forbush, a London biology student who seems naturally gifted but treats his studies, along with everything else, as just another whimsy of the privileged classes. He has eyes for fellow student Hayley Mills, and accepts a research assignment studying penguins to prove his mettle to her. None of Hurt's life – or what we have been watching in the film up to this point – has been an indication to this unexpected turn. He's no fool, yet when we hear his mother's casual advice to dress up warm, and see him stocking up on wine and caviar ("it'll keep well in all that ice") we wonder if he really knows what he's in for. Hurt's problem isn't that he is rich, spoiled, or out of touch with reality, but rather that the consequence of these factors has left him shallow and directionless. When he finds himself alone at the end of the world with the penguin colony he is confronted with life stripped down to its essentials; there is nothing to focus on but himself and the penguins.

With the dramatic juxtaposition of the insulated Forbush and the extremes of the polar environment, it's a safe bet to expect this film to be about one man's personal awakening. While struggling with the objective role he has to play as a scientist, Forbush also grows attached to the staunch, hardy birds who are his only companions. He becomes drawn to them and the whole business of their existence. He suffers, celebrates, rages, and loses his grip, but holds on to himself, always apologising after every outburst, evaluating every act and voicing his thoughts into a tape recorder afterwards. We don't see the clichéd life-changing experience that is mistaken for character growth in so many other stories – it's sufficient that Forbush is simply given the opportunity to experience an alternative to the only other lifestyle he knew. We can't assume he won't continue his playboy ways when he returns to London, but we can be assured that he will be a little wiser. Strangely enough, the final scene infers this even though it is both incidental and wordless.

Mr Forbush and the Penguins doesn't short-change on the co-stars. Like the title character, we too are happy just to watch these endearing creatures marching en masse and waddling around the colony. The end credits acknowledge different scientists, which show that the film-makers made an effort to tell their story accurately (although it's annoying that the 'New Zealanders' in the film speak with twangy Australian accents). The decision to use Swedish documentarist Arne Sucksdorff to handle the Antarctic footage was a wise one, not only to remain faithful to the balance of fiction and non-fiction in the book but also to provide an entirely real (though totally alien) world for the characters to inhabit. This film just wouldn't have worked with fakery or process shots. The non-polar sections of the film were directed by Al Viola and uncredited film veteran Roy Boulting, who had married Mills shortly beforehand.

MY NEIGHBOR TOTORO (1988) 86m. Stow this one away for a future pick-me-up should you ever be bedridden, nostalgic, isolated, or feel yourself deserving of a treat. It took consecutive hits *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away* to bring animator Hayao Miyazaki to the attention of English-speaking audiences outside his native Japan, and it's a measure of respect for his films that they screen in festivals with the choice of dubbed or subtitled versions. *My Neighbor Totoro* has such assured naturalism and incidental detail that it seems we are watching animated actors, not just cartoon characters. The opening title sequence doesn't promise much – it preps us to expect some kind of unwatchable preschooler fare – and the beginning of the film is downplayed and simple, but as any previous viewer of *Totoro* knows, this is the essence of the film's charm. Miyazaki gives us a break from the usual

frantic adventures associated with animation and presents us with an animated representation of the real world, in which fantastical elements are introduced with rational explanations, so that when the real business of fantasy begins they seem part and parcel of the way of things. Miyazaki likes this sort of fusion: he would slip fantasy into reality even more gently in his following feature, the enchanting *Kiki's Delivery Service*, and then reverse the idea in *Spirited Away* by introducing elements of the real world to a supernatural one.

As *Totoro* begins we see Satsuki and her younger sister Mei moving to a family house in the country. Escaping presumably from Tokyo, where their father works, they joyously regard the weathered buildings, dusty attics, wild garden and forest as a world new and magical enough in its own right. Their father is also sympathetic to the natural spirits that pervade their home and surroundings. Into this environment is introduced a large, benevolent creature given the name 'Totoro' by Mei. Totoro is a clumsy-looking (yet graceful) cross between a rabbit, an owl and the Cheshire Cat (he's upstaged Catwise by an creature even more wondrous as the story unfolds). The presence of Totoro is used sparingly, and thus very effectively: we do not really know much about him beyond the experiences of the two girls and their own knowledge of him is secondary to their intuitive understanding. They accept him; we accept him.

I'm sure that what makes *Totoro* such a warm film for many viewers is its co-existence of the natural and preternatural worlds. As we have come to expect animated films to indulge themselves in the impossible, it comes as a pleasant diversion to watch Miyazaki's characters spending 'animated' time doing ordinary things – I love *Totoro*'s fantasy landscape but also get absorbed in simple scenes such as when the girls eat fresh vegetables or wait patiently at a bus stop. *Totoro* is observant without showing off how much effort it is putting into its detail (look at the difference between the way Satsuki and Mei run for example): at one instant its characters may appear cartoonish while in the next they are grounded by the same laws of physics that apply to all of us (I find those huge, rubbery, screaming maws irritating, which is why it was nice to see Satsuki's one genuinely emotional reaction – when she cries over her mother's illness – animated realistically with a normally-proportioned mouth). There's no gratuitous slapstick; there are no corny dramatics; there's no 'message'; there are, thankfully, no songs other than those diegetically necessary to the action; and, despite the paradox, the characters are not two-dimensional. The new millennium may have ushered in CGI as the animation tool of choice, but as Miyazaki's legacy shows, it will never replicate the human touch that defines cel animation. It takes a huge effort to produce a film like *Totoro*, yet it looks effortless. That's an admirable achievement.

MY NEIGHBORS THE YAMADAS (1999) 104m.

Many popular newspaper comic strips have been turned into animated features, but never like this. Film adaptations invariably place the characters of the comics into some kind of animated adventure but in Studio Ghibli's *My Neigbors the Yamadas* the format of the four-panel newspaper strip itself is transplanted into the medium of cinema. Several viewers may find the episodic narrative resulting from such a choice too long for its running time, which is why *Yamadas* hasn't sprung the followings earned by other films from Ghibli's catalogue. Instead the film reads as a series of animated gags taken directly from the strip (whether this is the case, or the vignettes have been written specifically for the screen, I can't tell) that share with us the life of the Yamada family (two parents, two kids, one grandparent and a dog) as if we were hearing a relative spin anecdotes at mealtime. The film's only noticeable structure is the arrangement of diverse gags into 18 chapter headings, varying in length from self-contained stories (A Family Crisis, The Fight for Justice) to passing vignettes (The Perfect Combo, Regret).

The film-makers probably figured that Japanese moviegoers would want to see the characters from the strip given life on the screen, without realizing how many of them might be uninterested in seeing an animated rehash of what they had already read in the comics. I'm not sure if knowing the strip beforehand is an advantage to viewing this film or not but there is something enchanting about watching the idiosyncrasies of family life in modern Tokyo, and

because there's nothing extraordinary about the Yamadas themselves the characters have universal appeal. They're both contemporary and traditional (it helps that there is an age range of about sixty years between them) and the frequent scatterings of haiku by Basho prove that the ups and downs of everyday life haven't changed over the centuries. It's also fun watching how scenes that are familiar to our own experiences are given a Japanese flavour – for example at one point the family choose who will make the tea after their meal by playing Jan Ken Pon. The look of *Yamadas* is unlike all other animated works from the celebrated Studio, opening with a gorgeously rendered montage of marriage metaphors but quickly settling down to the minimalist style of the newspaper strip (the characters are often surrounded by watercolor voids instead of background cels). I much prefer the softened coloring-pencil look of the movie to the crude ink rendering of the comic, in which the characters look like bug-eyed frogs. Ironically this sparse hand-drawn style was created entirely with computers, a surprising departure from the traditional detailed animation that has won the Studio fans worldwide. The digital angle, sure to irritate purists, could be one reason why director Isao Takahata's film didn't measure up to the success of his stunning, heart-breaking *Grave of the Fireflies* or the delightful reminiscences of *Only Yesterday*. However I find that it's *Yamadas*' unique quality that makes it one of the most repeatable Ghibli films. Its incidental nature makes it easy to digest in bite-sized pieces (i.e. without the strain of keeping up with a plot for the length of the movie) and musically, I find it irresistible – from the big-hearted orchestral opening and the kitschy, cheerful signature tune (that hums on the soundtrack as if it were just another character wandering about the house), right up to the literally uplifting karaoke conclusion. Now that's something you wouldn't get in any newspaper strip.

MYSTERY MEN (1999) 121m. By the end of the 90s the world of Comic Books, which was now putting on its hat and tie and calling itself Graphic Novels, had come up with a number of revisionist takes on the Superhero concept – most notably in the books 'Dark Knight' and 'Watchmen', which ripped away the capes and cowls and exposed the flawed, tortured, screwed-up people beneath. I wasn't aware of the Dark Horse comic 'Mystery Men' when the movie of the same name appeared, but it slots into the 90s Superhero-Movie boom so naturally that it's excusable for anyone to think it was written directly for the screen. By 1989 the *Batman* franchise had launched itself to new heights and cleared the path for comic publishing houses Marvel and DC to invade cinemas with their back catalogue of super heroes and super villains. *Mystery Men* didn't do too well when it arrived, which is a little surprising, as in retrospect its timing seems just right – poised between the *Batman* movies and the later flood of Hulk, Spiderman, X-Men, Fantastic Four and everybody else – but the public didn't appear interested in a spoof on superheroes. At least not until 2004's animated film *The Incredibles*, which easily outsold *Mystery Men* at the box office.

The difference between the two, of course, is that the Incredibles are truly incredible, while the Mystery Men (who can't even come up with a name for themselves) are truly implausible. The powers of William H Macy, Ben Stiller, and Hank Azaria in this movie wouldn't be enough to light a 40-watt bulb. Azaria throws cutlery at people; Stiller gets angry (he doesn't turn green and burst through his shirt; he just…warns people) and Macy is The Shoveler, who wields a shovel because, as he explains to his wife, 'he's good at what he does', which presumably is hitting people with shovels (actually he uses a spade, but calling his character The Spader might have invited lawsuits from [a] the black community, or [b] James Spader). The cast play their characters in a completely different beat to each other but find common ground in their desire to achieve recognition by using whatever talents they can find within themselves. This is a pretty tough act for anyone living in a place called Champion City, where there is no shortage of underdogs (to quote another superhero) wanting to join the ranks of famous crime-fighters. Besides that, the fight for justice is monopolised by one Captain Amazing, who is so successful that his personal logo is lost among the product endorsement patches on his suit. However even Amazing is not invulnerable, and when he goes missing, the Mystery Men decide it

would boost their rep to mount a rescue mission by recruiting more wannabe heroes, including Janeane Garofalo as 'The Bowler', and Wes Studi as 'The Sphinx' (in a role that would have been perfect for James Earl Jones' profound timbre and inscrutable gaze).

Two hours is too long for most comedies, and *Mystery Men* is no exception. Not unexpectedly, the final act throws the production budget up on the screen where we can see it, although fortunately the usual explosions, whirlpools of light, and crumbling masonry are interspersed with enough silly moments to stop the film from bogging down entirely. It's plain that the fun comes not from the sets or FX, but the characters. Azaria is hilarious as an ordinary guy earnestly maintaining the trappings of a hero, Stiller delivers one lame line after another in an attempt to be awe-inspiring, and Macy strikes the right chord by not going for big laughs but playing his character with a down-home sincerity. Much humor comes from their awareness that they are play-acting but still feeling they could become the real thing if enough people believed in them. This is particularly true of the original trio (Azaria is the archetypal comic fanboy who never grew up, practicing his super-heroism in the privacy of his bedroom), and we almost forget the backstories of the other members of the team, who have had their powers, or at least their commitment to justice, imposed upon them. Among the many funny moments: Greg Kinnear's cocksure Captain Amazing; the appearances of the arch-villain's seconds-in-command (bursts of disco on soundtracks always make me laugh); Macy, Stiller, and Azaria arguing in a diner about their image; the trio criticizing the lack of panache of the villain's henchmen moments before getting beaten up by them; their retaliatory, childish attack on the bad guys' car; Paul Reubens' arrival as 'The Spleen' (don't ask); the Sphinx's rhetorical tautologies, which are about as philosophical as Yogi Berra; and the open try-outs for citizens interested in joining their humble band (you could call it The Just-Us League of America). Like the Mystery Men themselves, this film is unjustly overlooked. I guess the public likes even their spoof heroes to have extraordinary powers.

THE NAVIGATOR (1988) 92m. New Zealand director Vincent Ward had some difficulty getting this, his second feature, off the ground despite critical acclaim for his debut *Vigil*. *The Navigator* is seen through the eyes of Griffin (Hamish McFarlane, who does too much earnest yelling for my liking), a boy living in an isolated, snowbound village in 14th-century Cumbria. His older brother Connor (Bruce Lyons) has just returned home to bring news of the plague decimating the surrounding lands. Fearing the wrath of God, an expedition is sent from the village to place, by way of an offering, a cross atop a church on 'the far side of the Earth' (New Zealand). Griffin claims he has already seen the journey (if not lived it) and serves as the party's navigator – although what he is navigating is not only space but also time and consciousness.

Ward jumps the gap of six hundred years and the distance of half a planet assuredly, but his unfixed narrative, interrupted by repetitious flashbacks (which, since Griffin is using them to map their future path, are simultaneously flashforwards), is less comfortable. This is a film based on an idea: Ward has a beginning and an ending, but no strong narrative meat in the middle. The party's odyssey is over before it can reach the epic quality of a true odyssey. *The Navigator* does not concern itself much with the spirit of adventure (which would serve this particular story well) but instead sticks to the more appropriately medieval doom-laden concerns of God, death, and prophecy. I'm glad at least that Ward didn't turn his time-travel story into the kind of culture-shock cliche that depends almost entirely on anachronism gags. I also like the way he keeps the nameless city (ostensibly Auckland) deserted and empty of all activity save that of the machines and vehicles that prowl the shadows like nocturnal scavengers. His approach reinforces the notion that everything Griffin is seeing is a dream (it's like an ultra-sober *Wizard of Oz* – it's even bookended with

black and white sequences and features a journey to a magical city), but what prevents us from dismissing his story as imaginary is the accuracy of his visions. Griffin sees highways, television, a submarine, and even a glimpse of a second potential apocalypse – the 20th century's nuclear update of the plague. This is Ward's nod to New Zealand's strong anti-nuclear stance at the time, one which did not find favor with the US military and caused much public debate.

The Navigator has ambition and imagination, but still appears incomplete. You might come out of this feeling that something is lacking. But you have to admire Ward for sticking to his vision and producing something other than the black comedies and urban/rural 'social' dramas that had the NZ film industry in a stranglehold. His keen visual eye and deft smoke-and-mirrors approach prove that a real director can still make a class act out of a modest budget.

NEAR DARK (1987) 90m. On the face of it, there seems little that is exceptional, storywise, with this reworking of the vampire myth. A young farmhand (Adrian Pasdar) meets up and falls in love with a young woman (Jenny Wright) who happens to belong to a clan of vampires. Once smitten (not to mention bitten), he finds himself dependent on their wiles to survive. Naturally, he resists. If this sounds like *The Lost Boys*, also released in 1987, then you'll probably realize why *Near Dark* became a victim of bad timing and lost attention at the box office.

Near Dark is, however, a treat for horror fans. The vampires are genuinely scary – not so much by dint of their supernatural powers as by their contemporary, thuggish attitudes towards violence (There's a bratty kid who, as in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, is bitter with the knowledge that he is doomed to eternal life and will never be able to 'grow up' – he's like a social worker's worst nightmare). Other films in the vampire boom of the late eighties (e.g. *Fright Night, Vamp, Innocent Blood*) revitalized the myth by using urban American settings and putting a quirky spin on their stories. *Near Dark* is different in that it doesn't play for laughs, and has the notable distinction of avoiding nearly every image associated with vampires. There are no wielded crucifixes, bats, wooden stakes, bloodstained fangs. In fact, the word 'vampire' isn't even mentioned – we are just expected from our knowledge of popular folklore to assume that's what they are. That they are creatures of the night is emphasized by their one true fear: daylight. The title of the film points out how their lives are dictated by the sunset-sunrise cycle. For all intents and purposes, this is the only enemy these vampires have. They are too savvy to worry about stakes and crucifixes because they know that modern society has no time or belief invested in their legend. This group, roaring across-country in their blacked-out van, are successful survivors because they have transcended the old-world thinking (and portrayal) of traditional vampires and become the serial killer equivalent more befitting the psyche of the late 20th century. The arid desert setting and menace of the sun help us empathize with the vampire's thirst. Kathryn Bigelow's direction is broody and assured – the scene in which the vampires take their time dispatching of their victims in a diner will definitely be cut for television! Tangerine Dream contribute their customary one-size-fits-all score.

NICE GIRLS DON'T EXPLODE (1987) 78m. Other film-makers could take a lesson from this comedy, which gets the right mileage out of its simple premise: April Flowers (Michelle Meyrink, a regular player in teen comedies) is kept away from boys by her overprotective mother (Barbara Harris) because fires have a tendency to spontaneously ignite whenever her hormones are aroused. When it looks as though she's about to rekindle a friendship with an old flame (William O'Leary), Mom goes into overdrive.

The film's title is suggestive of those disposable quickies from the Troma studio, but it's really nothing of the kind. I don't know whether *Nice Girls Don't Explode* is underrated, overlooked, or just unknown, but it's an appealing comedy. True, there are no great moments or humorous highlights, but the film's buoyant tone remains faithful from start to finish. This is aided by the script's trimming of subplots and padding, so that the story is almost solely constructed of ongoing oneupmanship between Harris and O'Leary, with Meyrink caught in the middle. Wallace Shawn plays a fourth character (a

pyromaniac that has trouble making friends!) just to give the other three something to bounce off. What I like about the film is that all four of the film's central players not only give totally different performances, as if they had been placed together from four separate comedies, but also relate to each other in very different ways – e.g. Shawn meets Meyrink in a psychiatrist's waiting room, sells incendiary supplies to her mother, and makes friends with her boyfriend in jail, yet is completely unaware that the three of them have any outside connection. It's this state of inhabiting their own private universes that prevents everyone in the film from noticing anyone else's eccentricities – the spillover effect is that we don't think they come across as that unusual either.

The whole idea of teenage hormones literally catching alight in the heat of passion makes *Nice Girls Don't Explode* a humorous reminder of those old public information films that American youth was shown in the 50s. If it weren't for the clothes and cars, you'd swear that this film was supposed to take place in that era. In fact, it is so wholesome in its execution that it almost could have been made back then – but it's plain that the film's appearance is meant to perpetuate the tongue-in-cheek 50s morality of the whole enterprise.

NIGHT OF THE LEPUS (1972) 88m. What can the producers of this film have been thinking? With the taxonomical charts all but exhausted for likely movie monsters it appears that one of the few options left available was rabbits. For rabbits, read the six-foot killer variety. You might think that such material could only be interpreted, filmwise, as camp, but Z-feature director William F. Claxton (this is his best-known film) treats his story as soberly as the Latin denotation of the title would have it. You can call a spade a spade, but a lepus is still a bunny, and no amount of spooky lighting and bloodied muzzles doth a monster make. By-the-numbers plot involves Professor Roy Bennett (Stuart Whitman) and his wife Gerry (Janet Leigh) trying to rid Arizona farmland of a rabbit plague by injecting them with an experimental (what else?) virulent serum. Said serum, in the tradition of all sci-fi horror flicks, increases rabbits to giant size and sends them on the rampage ("They're getting meaner and hungrier," says Whitman, and that's while they're still pet-sized!). The expected bunny attacks ensue until our quick-thinking heroes come up with a means to destroy them. This, as it transpires, involves a subtle mix of electrocution, machine-gunning, and incineration.

To tell the truth, I feel a little sorry for the makers of this film. They'd obviously gone to some effort to have us take the rabbit threat seriously. These intentions last about as long as it takes to get to the first rabbit attack, which should coincidentally mark the first time everyone watching will laugh out loud. But apart from this scene, *Night of the Lepus* is quite dull and has little that is humorous. There are a couple of moments: The sheriff exhorts the help of a drive-in audience who unquestioningly obey his absurd-sounding orders; a man driving across state ignores hitch-hiking Whitman, reminding his wife about not picking up hitchers, "especially when they're carrying guns".

Lepus is a failure on every level – it was even rated PG, not an auspicious start for a horror film – but it isn't too hard to imagine it being terrifying for young children, by dint of the interminable slow-motion stampeding rabbit footage (which begins to take on a surreal quality) and the mixture of monster-bunny noises (they sound alternatively like cattle, elephants, and cassettes being chewed up in a tape deck). The juxtaposition of harmless cuddly animals turning into hopping mad omnivores (not carnivores, as the film suggests) may be exactly the kind of thing to give some kids nightmares. The screenplay was very loosely based on Russel Braddon's novel 'The Year of the Angry Rabbit'. Watch out for DeForest Kelley as Elgin Vlark, a character with a name even sillier than his own. Footnote: The real-life Australian and New Zealand rabbit plagues mentioned in the film have their own solutions – in NZ you can spend one day of the April holidays participating in the Annual Easter Bunny Shoot!

1984 (1956) 90m. It's a little puzzling that this film begins with a statement saying that it has been 'freely adapted' from George Orwell's classic novel, because everything in the screenplay follows the story's outline from beginning to end. It may have been the simplicity of the plot that failed to ignite

much interest from me when I was assigned the book in high school, and it didn't help much that I was reading it as low-tech science fiction rather than a treatise on totalitarian government. Neither did I get too excited about the higher-profile movie remake of 1984 (in the year 1984), which even now can only conjure up three impressions: (a) too much brown, (b) Richard Burton looking fed up with being Richard Burton, (c) jarringly inappropriate Eurythmics songs.

However, I find the 1956 version oddly involving, primarily because of the circumstances of its viewing. This first film version of Orwell's story (made 8 years after the book's publication) has never been commercially available and exists only as a bootleg, passed from collector to collector, sold on the grey market, or exchanged via PC on the Internet. I'm a diehard advocate for films being seen in cinemas in the best prints possible, but I find in the case of *1984* that less is more (a phrase that sits nicely among the novel's other oxymoronic slogans 'War is Peace' and 'Freedom is Slavery'). Watching this movie as a bootleg – with poorer picture quality and in gritty black and white – is the perfect way to see it. There's a sense of illicitness in the act of viewing which serves the subterfuge and paranoia of the story very well, as if we were watching an artefact from the past that had been smuggled out of the vault and was now doing the rounds underground. Because the film was made close to the era when the book was written it gives me the same feeling as viewing Marcel Carne's *Children of Paradise*, which was made with some sleight of hand in difficult circumstances during the Occupation of France.

I may be in the minority by preferring Edmond O'Brien's turn as Winston Smith to John Hurt's portrayal in the later film, but I'm pretty sure everyone agrees that Jan Sterling is terribly miscast as Julia. This isn't her fault – any actress would have fared just as badly, as it is the part itself that is misconceived, bearing little resemblance to the uninhibited Julia of the novel, who uses sex with dozens of men as her own personal expression of rebellion. It's when Winston and Julia start getting lovey-dovey that the film slows down, but they are brought back to reality in a wonderfully chilling moment, and the final act picks up the pace again. Julia's promiscuity and some scenes of brutality have obviously been left out of the film version for censorship reasons (and Winston's cell is far too clean and spiffy), but there is a kind of glum, low-rent fatality to the production that suggests oppression through attrition. Donald Pleasance is an ideal choice in a small, yet sympathetic role, as Parsons (the poor guy would have to go through all this again in George Lucas' own Orwellian dystopia, *THX-1138*), but Michael Redgrave is less convincing as O'Brien (renamed to O'Connor in this version for some reason…maybe Edmond objected). We see him only as a Bad Guy, which makes Winston and Julia look pretty stupid for trusting him, but then again, their willingness to confide in O'Connor so utterly may simply highlight their desperation.

There are a couple of dumb moments – Winston's anxious remark that rats are the thing he fears most is too obvious a plant, and the single-minded reaction of people in the crowd scenes is stagey – but decades after the year 1984, the relevance of Orwell's ideas make his book much less science-fictional and satiric. How suspicious our times seem now, when we look back at the citizens of Oceania held in constant fear by a war which has been exploited, and possibly manufactured, by government-controlled media, and we no longer think concepts like telescreens, revision of history, doublethink, and thought crimes seem unusual. It all helps the 1956 film version seem even more like a warning assembled by revolutionaries in the past.

THE NINTH CONFIGURATION (1980) 118m. William Peter Blatty directed this film version of his own early novel 'Twinkle Twinkle, "Killer" Kane', although seeing as both the book and the film had been rewritten, revised, and re-edited a number of times, it's a safe bet that even he wasn't sure what to do with his material. As it stands, *The Ninth Configuration* is sprawling and disjointed. Blatty's justification? It's set in a mental asylum. At its worst, it is supposed to be profound; at its best it's amusing. Unfortunately, films set in madhouses routinely trot out trite observations (who is crazier, the people on the inside or the people on the outside?), and *Configuration* doesn't go much way to improving that track record. You'd also have to be a

pretty green film-goer not to spot the twist revealed midway through the story.

The asylum in this case is a castle deep in a forest in the American Northwest. Hardly therapeutic, as one character is quick to observe, but loonily gothic enough for Blatty's intentions. The patients, we learn, may not really be crazy but just faking it to get their 4F out of the army. Hence we have inmates who bash walls with hammers "to teach the atoms a lesson", audition different breeds for all-dog performances of Shakespeare, think they're superheros, and dress up in outrageous costumes. The film's biggest failing is its theatrical presentation of madness, all wackiness and one-liners – the clause that Blatty has built into the premise (that they may just be pretending to be crazy) doesn't work, firstly because insane people don't act as if they're in Monty Python sketches, and secondly because sane people aren't stupid enough to put on such gonzo routines. There is one genuine case amongst the suspected fakers (a one-time astronaut played by Scott Wilson) but since his behavior is no different to all the others he just becomes indistinguishable from the rest of the charade. And then there's Stacy Keach as Colonel Kane, the new director of the asylum, who looks like Adam West in *Batman* after a lobotomy and doesn't seem more than a few steps away from becoming a resident himself. Blatty makes play-acting the thrust of the story, as players begin to take on roles within roles. This idea works well enough (in one scene, a character describes Hamlet as acting crazy as a means to prevent himself from really going crazy) but the screenplay has religious pretensions that just get in the way. The image of a crucifix on the moon is a pretty cool one, but its value becomes more, not less, without elaboration.

Blatty has some technical flair but is plainly not an actor's director. The performers seem to follow whichever interpretation they favour – Ed Flanders emotes uncertainly, Neville Brand's critical attitude looks like it's coming more from the actor and not the character, and Keach doesn't appear to have fully recovered from the catatonia he had in *End of the Road* ten years earlier. Even Blatty gets in on the act as one of the inmates. I'd still recommend *Configuration* in spite of (or probably because of) its flaws because it still has enough unique material, quick-fire dialogue and cinematic qualities to make it interesting. The payoff is an unexpected sequence late in the story that looks like it belongs in a whole other movie – it's also the only part of it that appears dated even for the time it was filmed!

NORTH WEST FRONTIER (1965) 133m.

This supremely enjoyable adventure yarn finds Kenneth More and Lauren Bacall, among others, making a train trip to Delhi in 1905 India. British officer Captain Scott (More) is to escort a 6-year old Hindu prince away from an uprising of Moslem rebel fanatics. Accompanying him are the prince's governess (Bacall), a cynical journalist (Herbert Lom), an arms dealer, and a couple of representatives from the British embassy. With such a diverse group it's only likely to expect much philosophical/political debate, and sure enough, everyone has their say. We don't weary of this, however, because their arguments never sink to the level of bickering or breast-beating. They are controlled – almost polite – with each person a self-proclaimed expert on the values of the others. At any rate, they only get into discussions while the train is on the move, and their journey is anything but smooth.

Northwest Frontier has plenty of suspense, action, and interesting characters. Even though none of the passengers really know each other they are always congenial, warm, and supportive. Wilfrid Hyde-White's dear old gentleman is unflappable no matter what the circumstances – but he, like More, is simply displaying the distance of manners that the British relied on to get them through those turbulent colonial years. More speaks in exactly the same snappy, chipper tone of voice throughout the film (he's also the only one who seems to sweat) as if he were rallying a scout troop. It's easy to like these characters because they're always looking after each other. Even Gupta, the Indian engine driver, has Victoria, his beloved engine, to fuss over. And Scott's relationship with Gupta is not of the sahib/menial variety – they genuinely enjoy each other's company. It's great seeing them relax and sing a cheerful boating song while the train trundles along the empty frontier (a scene which is not included in the shorter cut of this film). If this all sounds to good to be true, then don't worry: there is

still enough underlying tension from one exponent of the group to provide a showdown at the film's end – fortunately not to the expense of any of the other passengers (don't you hate movies that set up characters with noble qualities just so it will seem more poignant when they get killed off in some contrived act of self-sacrifice?) The film's decent production values supply plenty of location shooting, big crowd scenes, and wide-screen. Strangely, the only image I remember from first seeing this film years ago was that of the small prince standing before a giant, spinning flywheel.

O.C. AND STIGGS (1985) 109m.

Everybody, including me, who'd read National Lampoon's magazine feature 'Summer of O.C. and Stiggs' rejected this film version when it eventually showed up. Firstly, it's just not that funny – at least not in the way that the original stories were. Secondly, it suffers from monumental miscasting – not of the actors, but of director Robert Altman. I can't understand how Altman ever got involved with this assignment, as his distinctive, observational satire is poles apart from the sophomoric humor that trademarks the Lampoon. We'd already seen the magazine's classic story 'Vacation 58' watered down for the film that would become *National Lampoon's Vacation*, so in retrospect shouldn't have maintained high hopes for any further film projects based on their catalogue. Perversely, *National Lampoon's Animal House*, which was a huge hit and did manage to capture the magazine's anarchic tone, was written for the screen first and translated into a magazine edition afterwards.

O.C. and Stiggs would have been a tough sell anyway. As written, the characters are hilarious because they are unconscionably cruel – their sole reason for existing is to pursue an ongoing campaign of persecution against the wealthy Schwab family. It's easier to get away with this sort of thing in print than it is on film, so to make the characters more audience-friendly, the screen versions are given a background history. This is a major mistake, because it's the absence of motive that makes the original stories so funny: it was the mission of O.C. and Stiggs to make the Schwab's life a living hell for no other reason than they were Schwabs. What the film-makers didn't recognize was that in this context the cruelty of the story couldn't be taken seriously (or offensively) because there was no rational framework on which it could hang. At least Altman does manage to capture the surreal tone of the story to some degree. His distinct directorial style finds actors ignoring the absurd subtext of the story and seemingly making up their own film within a controlled visual landscape of studied pans and slow zooms.

In the final reckoning it looks as though Altman is more at ease when he is directing the veteran players in his cast – Ray Walston and Dennis Hopper provide the film with its most amusing moments even though their approach and characters are entirely different. It's amusing at first to see Hopper decked out as if he was still a photojournalist in *Apocalypse Now*, but less amusing when this connection is blatantly spoofed with a helicopter charging along to Wagner in the finale. The ending of the film aims to be farcical, but Altman's pacing is all wrong. It reminds me of the instructions that Alan Alda is given in *Sweet Liberty*, in which he is told that to make a successful film he must show nudity, destruction of property, and defiance of authority. This would seem to suit the mission statement of the Lampoon quite happily, but not Altman – he tries for two out of three, but it looks more like two falls out of three, and he loses both times. Ultimately, *O.C. and Stiggs* is either a disappointment or just bewildering, depending on whether or not you've read the source material beforehand. It's easier going the second time around if you're willing to give it another chance, and it is definitely a unique product. On those grounds alone, it can't be dismissed completely out of hand.

OCEAN WAVES (1993) 72m. Probably because of its made-for-TV roots, short running time,

and simple story, this animated film from Studio Ghibli was long unavailable in Western countries, which at least spared it from Disney's wholesale redistribution of the Ghibli catalogue with dubbed English soundtracks. This is a practice which is baffling in cases like *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (a film which uses distinctly Japanese sensibilities to point out the similarities and differences with Western family life, so what's the point of dubbing it?) or just plain annoying in sweet films such as *Whisper of the Heart*, where American accents are jarring when coming out of the mouths of Japanese students.

More appropriately translated as 'I Can Hear the Sea', *Ocean Waves* departs from many other Ghibli films by making its protagonist a boy (Taku). The story depicts his encounters with a new female student (Rikako) during their graduation year, before they leave high school and set out for universities or the workplace (the title refers to the southern shores of Kochi City on Shikoku, inferring that when the characters leave for the bigger cities after graduation they will still know what it is like to 'hear the sea', or recognize the distinct psyche of their hometown). Campus stories line the shelves wall-to-wall in Japanese comic shops, and there's not a lot of variation to be found in the storylines, but this works to *Waves*' advantage. Realizing that a cinema presentation would have placed more audience expectations on their downplayed story, Ghibli opted for a TV-movie approach that was much more suitable. The animation is not grandiose, nor the direction flashy; the color palette has a cool, muted, pastel feel; there are no stand-out scenes or set-pieces; and the film is not self-conscious of an animated 'style' at all (however, in an act of foresight, the production team abandoned the then-standard 4:3 television ratio in favour of widescreen).

The fact is: simple is nice. The second time I saw *Ocean Waves*, almost a year after the first, I found I had forgotten the specifics of the story, and that there were some scenes I had remembered but was unable to place within the framework of the film because of the story's incidental nature. Without the distraction of looking forward to a 'big scene' or highlight when watching the story a second or third time, I'm sure viewers can better appreciate *Waves*' easygoing nature and evenness of tone. Because nothing extraordinary happens to the characters it's easy for us to recognize moods and feelings – the specific circumstances become irrelevant – of our own campus lives, particularly if they are viewed from a distance of years. The characters' memories span only one year, but the mood they capture is timeless. Nostalgia aside, what also helps to make *Waves* irresistible is the cute, sentimental score which fits the visuals so well that no other music seems possible. After the film's pivotal but effectively unfussy last line, and the final credits begin rolling past snapshots of Taku and Rikako while Youko Sakamoto (who provides the voice of Rikako) sings the by now-familiar theme tune, *Ocean Waves* may leave you both buoyed and wistful, which, I guess, is the point of nostalgia after all.

THE OLYMPIAD (1938) 205m. Leni Riefenstahl's film of the 1936 Berlin Olympic games is considered to be among the greatest documentaries ever made. It's important both as a historical document and as an example of film-making technique, but while the grandeur of the event and the film's mammoth running time do infuse it with an epic sense, modern-day audiences may find their attention wandering. Hitler and Goebbels saw the spectacle of the games as an opportunity to show off the new Reich, but neither were responsible for employing Riefenstahl, who had made the jingoistic Nazi rally film *Triumph of the Will* a couple of years earlier. Riefenstahl's attachment to the project, via an Olympic official, ensured that the film of the event would not escape being viewed as a propaganda piece in itself, although this seems arbitrary insofar as the Olympics are a hype vehicle for every participating country anyway. Riefenstahl, who had previously directed and acted in features, puts a creative spin on her document and utilizes different technological innovations. She embellishes the events without changing facts, but lays herself open to charges of pro-fascist imagery – the opening sequence, for example, depicts buffed, nude athletes flexing their muscles against dramatic skies and has obvious Aryan overtones. But if this is the case, why would she include so much footage of black athlete Jesse Owens winning event after event and

debunking the Aryan supremacy myth right before Hitler's eyes? Riefenstahl has always claimed her life's work as being artistically motived, and it's at least easier to believe this in *Olympiad* than it is in *Triumph*. Notice that there wasn't any of this fuss when a group of directors similarly fetishized athletic bodies in the 1972 Olympics movie *Visions of Eight*.

Olympiad is split into two parts, 'The Festival of the People' and 'The Festival of Beauty'. Part one focuses on track and field while part two looks at other events outside the stadium – but there's only so much running and jumping a viewer can endure. By the time the film returns to pentathlon and decathlon events already covered in the first half, it starts getting tedious. *Olympiad* doesn't start off too excitingly (watching people throwing shot and hammers isn't too exciting at the best of times) but picks up once the races start – visually these are more involving because at a glance we can tell who is winning at any moment throughout the event, even if we don't know who they are. You'd have to assume that Riefenstahl did the best job she could editing the 400,000 feet of film she'd retrieved from the 30 camera operators stationed around the Games, and there are some interesting moments to be found. For example, the 1500 meters is filmed in one continuous take (it's odd seeing the New Zealand victor accompanied by sieg heils from the crowd); we see a shot of Hitler looking deflated after a German relay runner drops the baton when victory appears imminent; Riefenstahl inserts shaky close-ups of hands and feet as a marathon runner is on the home stretch, projecting to us his physical and mental exhaustion; the horses on a steeplechase regularly dump their riders into a ditch and a pond; and in the film's famous closing montage, Riefenstahl makes high divers appear weightless by filming them at dizzying angles and variable speeds. It's also interesting to see how much has changed since the days of the 11th Olympics – the stadiums and uniforms aren't plastered with crass product logos, the winners are presented with wreaths instead of medals, and the sporting equipment is simpler (e.g. non-flexible vaulting poles). It's disquieting to see competitors on the shooting range firing at human-shaped targets when we know that World War II was only three years away. Couple that with the final images of the flags of all nations bowing slowly to the ground and the smoke from the extinguished Olympic flame rising into an ominous sky, and you'll see why its impossible to view *Olympiad* nowadays without irony.

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY (1957) 111m. It was sporting of Rank studios to film this true story, which shows Germans in a sympathetic – even heroic – light, only a dozen years after WWII had ended. It also makes for an interesting exercise in the power of cinema. Despite bitter postwar feelings it must have been hard for Allied audiences not to root for the 'enemy' POW trying to escape back to his homeland. And how many British films of that time would have gambled with a German actor as its leading man? As it happened, this was a star turn for Hardy Kruger, who gives a charismatic performance as Lt Franz von Werra, a Luftwaffe pilot forced down over Kent and then shipped to a POW camp in the Lake District. His tenacious escape attempts throughout the remainder of the film make for compelling viewing. He tries so hard that you'll really want him to succeed, especially by the end (in a sequence I find quite surreal) when he is half-frozen and can't seem to manage another step.

The One That Got Away succeeds because of two reasons: the humanization of individual struggle negates the political ordinance of war; and regardless of race, color, or creed, we always like to see someone beat the odds. For those of us who have seen many an escape story featuring Allied heroes it comes as a breath of fresh air to see a story told from the other side. This film also points out one reason for the lack of such stories – how exactly do you escape from an island nation? But Werra has several plans. His initial breakout is absurdly simple – he runs when the guards' backs are turned – but his efforts to remain free become increasingly audacious: he may be fulfilling a desire or responsibility to live up to his flamboyant (but largely fabricated) public image. The screenplay stays on its toes the whole time. I especially enjoy the way civilians are obliging, a little bemused, and polite whenever they encounter Kruger's character – I wonder if director Roy Ward Baker took some perverse pleasure in showing easygoing Britishers being duped by

Werra's confident fast-talking and dashes for freedom. This is the one subgenre of war movies that makes it okay for us to view the antics of the characters as if they were schoolboys larking about and dodging the headmaster: the one type that doesn't demand we concentrate on the tragic elements of war. It acts, of course, as 'escapism'. Werra's escape is indeed epic in scale – in reality he traveled nearly half a planet to make his way home (the film stops about halfway through). The fascinating footnote contains enough material for another whole story.

ONLY YESTERDAY (1991) 118m. The next time someone tells you that cartoons are for kids, shake your head sadly, mention *Only Yesterday*, and tell them how sorry you feel that they will never enjoy watching fine, mature works of animation. Isao Takahata's meditative story (he wrote and directed) could be seen as the finale of a progressive coming-of-age trilogy, all made by different directors and writers within Japan's Studio Ghibli. What would thematically be the first, *Whisper of the Heart*, deals with friendship, romance and the details of life in junior high school; the second, *Ocean Waves*, covers the same themes in high school and post-graduation; the third, *Only Yesterday*, finds a woman reminiscing about elementary school while she ponders her direction in life. All three films share an animation style devoted to everyday realism, as if they were live-action dramas with an animated overlay.

The premise of the story is simple: 27-year old Taeko has a ten-day holiday and is going to spend it working on a safflower farm in the country. During this time she recalls memories of when she was ten years old and living in the city with her parents and two older sisters. The first time I saw *Only Yesterday* I thought I'd missed the point of the flashback sequences, but realized, on second viewing, that I had been conditioned by Western cinema's use of flashbacks as a means to comment on, or explain, the actions of the protagonist in the present. The connection in Takahata's story is tenuous at best: the scenes in the past are visualised with a different color sense than the present and the 10-year old Taeko looks and acts so differently from the 27-year old version that it's hard to imagine them as the same person. But the fact is that people change when they age (just look at Michael Apted's *7-Up* documentary series if you want to see how dramatically childhood personalities can disappear in adulthood), and Takahata knows he doesn't need to make the events in the past relevant to Taeko's situation in the present. Taeko's reminscences aren't revelations, merely sketches that have stuck in her memory. How many other animated films are you likely to see that would spend screen time watching characters eat a pineapple, struggle with math homework, or discuss menstruation? And only Takahata/Ghibli would dare to animate a ten-minute dialogue scene between two characters sitting in a car. While it's true that the charm of *Only Yesterday* comes from the scenes in the past, the present-day story takes on a life of its own as the story develops and contributes greatly to its calm and contemplative mood.

But what's the point of the film's back-and-forth structure? It's not until *after* the final credits begin that it becomes plain, when both past and present coalesce (If you are lucky enough to see this in a cinema with an audience, it may pay to do as I did: inform the projectionist not to turn on the house lights when the end titles start). The point is not that Taeko is remembering specific incidents but is remembering her personality as a child, when everyday life was full of possibilities. The predicted route of most films of this type (which, let's face it, are filmed with real actors, not animated ones) is to provide the protagonist with a choice in the final reel, and usually that choice is between a practical decision and a fanciful one. We already know, for example, that Tom Hanks is going to jump recklessly into the ocean after mermaid Daryl Hannah in *Splash*. But Taeko's choices in the story's final scene are both reasonable; it would be realistic of her character to take either one, for better or worse. You may not realize how much you've been drawn in by this film until its poignant final moments, when you find that you really do care about these characters. Like Taeko, you'll want to revisit these memories again.

OUR MOTHER'S HOUSE (1967) 105m.

Not the sentimental family story you might expect – in fact, after viewing this film you might think of the

title as spookily possessive. Jack Clayton directs a cast of mostly children in this adaptation of Julian Gloag's novel. The story begins with the death of the children's bedridden mother, an event that upsets them terribly, but unites them in a common purpose: to keep the legacy of their mother's household management alive.

The idea of children fending for themselves in their homes without parental supervision has been done before in everything from comedies to horror movies, and while *Our Mother's House* isn't the last word on the subject, it does have a satisfying wholeness about it. It recognizes the need for authority in young, impressionable lives – most interestingly, the children allow their dead mother to continue managing their affairs by channeling her spirit through one of the older sisters, effectively placing consequence out of their hands. This transference of authoritative power from the material to the ethereal – between which the children make no distinction – might indicate that the story has something to say about religion, but this idea is put aside once the children's long-lost father (Dirk Bogarde) appears on the scene. If their mother represents (in their eyes) a benign divinity, then their shiftless father becomes the devil incarnate. Only Elsa, the eldest sister, refuses to fall for his charms. Gradually, the discipline of the household begins to crumble. Bogarde introduces 'sins' such as alcohol, adultery, gambling, forgery, seduction, and deceit, but significantly it is only when he challenges the children's own faith with doubt (read: heresy) that he finally goes too far.

Clayton handles the story intelligently, although he gets a little melodramatic towards the end. The film's somber mood is probably helped by the casting of Bogarde, whose characters seem to end up dead in most of his work. Georges Delerue wrote the tender score. Worth a look, even if it is regarded as one of Clayton's weaker films.

OVERNIGHT (2004) 115m. Imagine this: you're an average working schmoe who is one of the many hopefuls writing screenplays and sending them off to Hollywood. Out of the blue, your screenplay is picked up by a major studio and you find yourself behind the camera, directing your script with a professional cast and crew. Your own rock band is recording the film's soundtrack, and is signed to a label. Oh, and as a bonus: why not have your own bar, thrown in for free?

By all rights, the resulting behind-the-scenes documentary, *Overnight*, should have been a feel-good story about an underdog getting his big break and proving that dreams do come true. Undoubtedly, this is what Troy Duffy, the screenwriter in question, had in mind when he asked a couple of his band members to follow him around with a camera. Unfortunately, it turned out to be another kind of film entirely. In Duffy we are presented with a man who not only spectacularly shoots himself in the foot, but nails said foot to the floor, sets fire to foot, and then dispatches heat-seeking missile towards foot. Aspiring film-makers will watch this film with horror – not so much of what Duffy does to himself, but of watching him fumble an opportunity they could only fantasize of having.

Duffy's success begins when Miramax boss Harvey Weinstein picks up his screenplay for a shoot-em-up gangster flick called *The Boondock Saints* and inexplicably gives the directorial reins to Duffy even though he has never made any kind of film before (this must be the moment that film students watching the documentary start foaming at the mouth). From that point on, there can be only one word to describe the ensuing 90 minutes, and that is *hubris*. On one hand, there is much to admire about the go-getting attitude of Duffy, who, despite never having had to deal with the Hollywood machine before, rolls up his sleeves (and puts on his overalls), and tackles the business head on. There's nothing wrong with being unafraid to play hardball with movie types, given the nature of the business, but Duffy takes it to extremes. The attention, money, and power bestowed upon him inflate an egomaniacal streak that is positively self-destructive. We're alerted to Duffy's dubious perspective on things quite early when he decides he wants Kenneth Branagh to star in his movie, without even considering the fact that he would be one of the most inappropriate actors he could cast (we're not entirely sure what kind of film *The Boondock Saints* is at this stage of the doco, but Shakespeare it definitely ain't). He gets an answering service, and Branagh immediately and permanently gets the shaft,

in the kind of basic Anglo-Saxon that is located at the Point of No Return. Duffy wants De Niro (more suitable, but just as unrealistic), is then passed over by Patrick Swayze (further down the ladder), and eventually is offered rock guitarist Jon Bon Jovi ("I didn't even know the cat was an actor" Duffy squawks). As the film goes on, Duffy abuses and alienates nearly everyone he meets in the movie business and recording industry, including his friends and even family. By now, Weinstein has cut him loose. We still recognize that Duffy has some talent and tenacity, but a scene where he responds to his long-silent brother's opening up of his heart is the point where we realize he is irredeemable.

In spite of these difficulties, *The Boondock Saints* did get completed, only to vanish after an opening week in a handful of theaters – ironically, the resulting documentary *Overnight* ended up in film festivals and found a wider audience. For Duffy, watching this film must be like seeing a scab peeled off, but even he should admit that it made audiences around the world aware of his own movie, which may have otherwise been totally forgotten. Clearly, your reaction to *Overnight* rests squarely on your reaction to Duffy; and this may be tempered or tainted depending on whether you have seen his film *The Boondock Saints* or not. There have been other directors who would have served themselves better by keeping their mouths shut early in their careers (P T Anderson, Tarantino, and Baz Lurhmann come to mind) but they can at least turn out a cinematic product of some vision and talent. Can the Troy Duffy of *Overnight* be forgiven for what he achieved as the Troy Duffy of *Saints*? It's an interesting exercise to decide what to view first – the movie or the documentary – and see how the order of viewing might influence your reactions to both. *Saints* in itself isn't a badly made movie, but it's derivative, illogical, and ultimately superficial. Duffy himself doesn't even appear to have any great interest in cinema, showing contempt for everyone involved in the business, from the Cannes festival crowd to film student classes. It may be that as a writer-director, Duffy is a one-trick pony, and in light of his behavior in *Overnight*, it doesn't seem likely that he will get the opportunity to prove otherwise.

PAPERHOUSE (1989) 92m. Catherine Storr's cult children's novel *Marianne Dreams* had already been made into a British television serial, *Escape Into Night*, fifteen years before this film version appeared. While the television adaptation followed the plot and ideas of the story faithfully, Matthew Jacobs' new screenplay takes liberties which fans of the novel may not enjoy. The premise is basically the same: a young girl (named Anna in the film) falls sick and is confined to bed for several weeks. She begins to have dreams about drawings she has made in a sketchbook and, upon discovering that a boy (Elliot Spiers) in her dreams actually exists in the outside world, becomes convinced that the control over her dreams is linked with the direction of real events.

Rather than the naïve child of the novel, Anna's character is a rebellious sub-teen whose fantasy dreamworld has now been redefined as Freudian subconscious. It's a difficult role for audiences to sympathize with, but Charlotte Burke plays the part convincingly. In fact it is less her growing relationship with Marc (the boy) than her ambivalent feelings toward her absent father that determines the direction of the story. These feelings cause her to (unconsciously?) recreate him as the agent of her sexual awakening – he becomes literally the man of her dreams. The climax of the story, in which her father drags her from the paperhouse employs imagery of a vaginal (fiery fissures opening in the ground around them) and phallic (the lighthouse waiting for her in the distance) nature, but is more 'climax' than conclusion. The film seems to end three or four times before Anna finally stands before the lighthouse – in the real world, this time – at the edge of a cliff (she is at the brink of womanhood) with her arms open, inviting what may come. This subtext makes for an interesting examination of the kind of emotional confusion usually associated with the onset of puberty, but in doing so loses the

children's audience that might have otherwise been attracted to the story. Neither, however, does the film seem intended specifically for adults. The real appeal, as in the book, comes from watching Anna's drawings materialize three-dimensionally in her dreams, and director Bernard Rose handles the transitory sequences well, imbuing the dream (later nightmare) sequences with their own plausible reality.

THE PARTY (1968) 99m. Peter Sellers and director Blake Edwards decided to take the Inspector Clouseau concept from their *Pink Panther* collaborations and run with it in this simple but funny cult comedy. There is no real story, just a series of gags and routines that unfold within the confines of a swanky but dry Hollywood party. Sellers removes the bumptious aspects of Clouseau and keeps the walking one-man-disaster premise for his creation Hrundi V. Bakshi, an Indian actor who finds himself accidentally invited to a producer's party after wreaking havoc on the set of his *Gunga Din* remake (he literally only gets three steps from the front door before things start going wrong). Why Sellers elected to make his character Indian is a bit of a mystery as there is no reason for it in the story other than to make him a complete foreigner amongst the Hollywood set (you can spot the lines that were inserted to give his nationality some 'relevance'). I'd say that Sellers wanted to utilize his gift for mimicry and accents in a way he hadn't tried before, at least not for the length of a feature – for those of us raised on *The Goon Show* his choice of character comes as no surprise. It may be an odd choice but it works beautifully and we don't think to question it: if anything, it helps cement the notion in our mind that he and fellow outsider Claudine Longet (playing an aspiring French actress) belong together by the film's end.

The Party has many funny gags, but loses its footing in a couple of places. Sellers is best when he is on the move and liable to get himself into trouble – when he is seated at a dinner table halfway through the movie the action instead must transfer to a tipsy waiter. Similarly, the slapstick gets more hysterical and less effective when Sellers disappears for much of the movie's final quarter – having characters repeatedly take pratfalls into a swimming pool is just plain lazy. That's not to say the film still can't be enjoyed – it's just that you have to switch gears from watching a Peter Sellers film to watching a 60s time capsule (the finale has go-go dancing, a brightly-painted baby elephant, and a sea of soap bubbles). *The Party* isn't just for Sellers fans – kids will enjoy the gadget-laden house and relate to his child-like reactions to the problems he causes (he tries to hide the evidence or disappear from the scene). The party hosts' house may remind you of the tacky, modernised home in Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle*, just as Sellers may remind you of Tati's creation Monsieur Hulot. Edwards' regular composer Henry Mancini provided the music, and yes, pop singer Longet – remember her kitsch-but-cute 'Love is Blue'? – does get to sing in her distinctive, sugary style.

THE PASSAGE (1979) 99m. One of the last films in the 70s to employ the 'star-stuffed' casting approach. Looking back on it, you'll see that three of the four principal characters could have been played by anyone, and that Anthony Quinn, James Mason, and (especially) Jean Simmons are given little to work with. It's only Malcolm McDowell, the youngest of the quartet, that makes a meal out of his role. And for better or worse, that meal is ham.

Quinn plays a solitary, gruff Basque shepherd (his name is never revealed during the film, a likely harbinger for his anonymous role/performance) hired by the French resistance during the German occupation to escort a professor (Mason) across the Pyrenees into Spain. As if the mountains weren't a big enough hurdle, Mason drags his family along for the ride, and a fanatical SS officer is dogging them every step of the way. Because *The Passage* flopped at the box office, and was long unreleased for home viewing, it has become one of those films that people remember rather than revisit. It's interesting to hear other people cite images they find most memorable, which often boil down to the same two or three (McDowell's "chop chop!" scene left an indelible impression on my high school gang when we saw an anamorphic 16mm print of the movie in a friend's garage). I can't be sure of the reasons for the film's failure – perhaps some of McDowell's antics were too sadistic – because it's not what I would call a bad

film, even if it's not as good as it should be. It is, by the nature of its premise, a different kind of war movie, a different kind of chase, and a story that requires the hero and villain to be kept separate. To be more specific: Quinn's party ascends through thick snow, leaving little opportunity for fast-moving chase sequences; the hunters and the game are few in number, ruling out the big battle scenes you would expect to see in a war picture (although there is a ridiculous shootout at a border crossing); and because the movie would be over the second that Quinn and McDowell meet (they do walk past each other unnoticed at the beginning of the film), the storyline has to keep cutting back from one to the other, deflating the tension of some scenes.

While these limitations may have created what many perceive to be the film's flaws, I find that they instead create differences that make *The Passage* easier to remember among other action-masquerading-as-war films. Having said that, the film would not nearly be as watchable without McDowell relishing his role as the fanatical German officer. We don't stop to think twice about his crazed behavior or obsessive pursuit of Quinn because the archetype of SS officers as villains has well been planted into our cinematic consciousness. McDowell might as well be the Boogeyman from the previous year's *Halloween*, and the timing of this film is cannily placed within the onslaught of stalk-and-slash movies that quickly appeared after that horror hit (and in true horror fashion, he doesn't 'die' the first time). Still, bright open snowy spaces are a completely different stalking arena to dimly lit woods, and while the film was made on location in the Pyrenees, it doesn't impress as visually as it should. This film obviously cost money, but what did they spend it on? The great-looking avalanche footage was lifted from another film, and the effects in the shock climax are nothing more than red paint being flicked at people to the accompaniment of dubbed gunshots. But then again, how can you not watch any film that features the one-time wife of 70s pop singer David Cassidy being molested by a guy wearing swastika underwear?

PEE-WEE'S BIG ADVENTURE (1985) 92m.

This got terrible notices when first released but has earned a following, especially by fans of director Tim Burton. The title would have you believing that this is a children's film, and you'd be partway right. It marks the feature debuts of both Burton and its star, Pee-Wee Herman (Paul Reubens). Reubens had previously introduced the Pee-Wee character in a television special and continued with a savvy children's show after his film got attention. In case you haven't seen any of these: Pee-Wee is an adult who behaves like a child and dresses in the types of suits the Beatles might have discarded early in their grooming phase. Basically, he's a boy who never grew up – the 'Big Adventure' of the title echoes Peter Pan's oft-expressed wish to someday experience a Big Adventure of his own. Pee-Wee lives in a glorified playhouse, speaks in a ducky, cartoon-character voice, and treasures a bike as his most valuable possession. The bike turns out to be the catalyst for the story, an *Easy Rider* spoof which takes the form of a quest. It's the most suitable plot device for this character, who would probably drive you crazy if he was stuck in the same setting for too long. As Pee-Wee sets off across America to find his bike (which is stolen early in the film) he runs into a series of characters just as two-dimensional as he is. It all ends with a chase, which might seem lazily predictable but makes sense here, as it's an ideal context for the spirited boy-and-bike reunion we've been waiting for.

Pee-Wee's Big Adventure communicates a genuine sense of eccentricity that keeps it bubbling along. Former Oingo Boingo band member Danny Elfman is a perfect choice as composer even though his only previous experience was a film score he'd written for his brother; Burton had worked on two quirky animated shorts for Disney which were shelved; and Pee-Wee's bizarre track record speaks for itself. Together these three outsiders created a product unique in cinema – even the non-Burton sequel *Big Top Pee-Wee* couldn't replicate it. Pee-Wee manages to keep us from disliking him despite his flaws, although strangely we never feel sympathy for him either. Even though he is in every scene of this movie we don't tire of the character because he lets the supporting cast handle most of the dialogue. The film's biggest mistake is to put in a 'meaningful' scene with a roadhouse waitress – it's really only a

means to (a) have Pee-Wee menaced by a jealous boyfriend (this doesn't really go anywhere), and (b) have him undergo some kind of learning curve which he reiterates in a phone call to his non-girlfriend (he tells her he's changed, but he plainly hasn't, rendering the scene obsolete – unless the point of it is to prove to us that he will never change). Some years after his films and television appearances as Pee-Wee, Reubens would suffer the embarrassment of being arrested for 'indecent exposure' at a porno house. At the end of *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* his alter ego Pee-Wee is no more wiser or sophisticated than when he started. Thank goodness.

THE PHANTOM TOLLBOOTH (1969) 90m.

After making over two hundred animated shorts, Chuck Jones finally got to the chance to direct a feature with this adaptation of Norton Juster's children's book. It's a colorful effort, but patchy. Children will be hooked by the film's live-action opening: a listless boy by the name of Milo is surprised to find a miniature tollbooth and car in his bedroom. The scene is set for some great adventure, but the switch to animation may lose the connection kids will have with the protagonist's real-life counterpart. The story is a blend of 'Alice in Wonderland' and 'Pilgrim's Progress', relating Milo's adventures in the lands of Dictionopolis and Digitopolis. It's one of the few films of its type that doesn't have a presiding villain. Indeed, the point of it is that wasted time (through laziness, disinterest, ignorance) is the only real enemy of childhood. As Juster's episodic book has been judiciously compressed, this revelation (as it occurs to Milo at the film's end) isn't too convincing. The film also has other flaws: there's too many songs in the first twenty minutes; character voices sound too much like Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Augie Doggie, and others; and the most memorable character from the book, the Watchdog, is badly conceived (he looks just like a regular dog, and his fatherly voice doesn't jibe with his dewy eyes).

The Phantom Tollbooth is recognizably a product of the Warners studio, although Milo is drawn noticeably in the Disney mold of child heroes. It may be of more interest to fans of Jones than those of the book, although it doesn't reach the heights of his short subjects. There's certainly less humor than you'd expect, and Jones makes almost no attempt at slapstick, sticking instead to the wit and wordplay prevalent throughout the book. To be fair, the book's abstract concepts would be difficult to adapt successfully to the screen. The film is uneven but is interesting as an alternative to the dominant Disney features of the time – you have to wonder about Warners' timing, considering Disney had died shortly beforehand. And it does improve as it goes on. It's no *Yellow Submarine* but you can see influences of psychedelia in the vivid colors and geometric patterns – it makes you wish that it would really cut loose with a couple of sequences more reminiscent of the zany cartoons the studio is famous fo

---

PHASE IV (1974) 84m. Made back in the days before any movie title with a Roman numeral in it was automatically a sequel. Those who knew about title designer Saul Bass, the designer of many memorable credit sequences for Hollywood movies (and co-author of the famous shower montage in *Psycho*) would have undoubtedly been curious as to what he might make as a feature debut if he ever had the chance. He certainly came up with something unexpected. *Phase IV* has since become a cult movie, not only for Bass' involvement but also its odd premise – two scientists working in a metal dome are laid under siege by hyper-intelligent ants. Much comparison has been made about the 'other' classic SF 'ants in the desert' movie *Them!*, mainly on issues of size, but the ants of *Phase IV* are much scarier. Shot in breathtaking close-ups by Ken Middleham, which should forever dispel anyone's image of ants as little black dots, it's almost plausible to believe that these creatures really are communicating on a higher level. The vague cosmology that opens the film suggests a sort of evolutionary catalyst, reminiscent of Poul Andersen's economical novel 'Brain Wave', which had all life on Earth evolving higher intelligence after the Earth moved out of an interstellar inhibition field.

70s cinema was fond of ecological-revenge scenarios, with various inhabitants of the planet getting even with mankind for exploiting the planet. The ant-agonists in this case have a different agenda, although the assimilation and eventual extinction of

humans seems to part of the process. By raising their consciousness the ants of *Phase IV* realize that by ceasing their species rivalry and banding together they can enslave colony members of a much higher potential – namely, us. We're quick to notice the hive-like appearance of the scientists' dome, the insectoid biohazard suits and masks they wear, and the detached, distinctly inhuman approach to death of their kindred. The story doesn't really hang together on the first viewing – although the film is chaptered in 'phases' we're not really sure what each phase is – but the visuals easily compensate (this film needs to be seen on a big screen). The idea of creating ant-level views of the world and pushing his lens as close as possible to small objects, making them appear huge onscreen, was patently the appeal that this project had for Bass. From the opening shots of a truck roaring along the desert, his visual hold on the film is assured. Criminally, the closing montage, a highlight of Bass' style, was lopped off by the studio, explaining the film's abrupt ending – fans of Japanese percussionist Stomu Yamashita had reason to be twice as annoyed. Ironically, although being a poster designer for many other movies, Bass had no part in *Phase IV*'s artwork, which misused his homage to Bunuel/Dali by marketing the film as a horror flick.

THE PHYNX (1970) 84m. The Phlop, more likely. Any comedy that starts with an animated credits sequence should set off warning bells, because it usually indicates some pretty lame schtick to follow, especially if you've never heard of the stars, writer or director. In that respect I'm 0 for 3 on the talent count for this film, although the supporting cast of cameos is impressively bizarre (Busby Berkeley, Colonel Sanders, James Brown, Joe Louis and many more). These walk-ons may be the only reason to watch it, if you can bear the thought of seeing the likes of Joan Blondell and Dorothy Lamour wading through this dud. *The Phynx* is the name of a four-man pop group manufactured by the SSA (Super Secret Agency) to infiltrate Albania – sigh, yes, Albania – to rescue kidnapped American celebrities of yesteryear. That's the plot in a sentence, and I would suggest that potential viewers spend ten minutes with a pen and paper sketching out how this film might progress from start to finish with that premise, and then compare the results.

The screenplay contains a few unpredictable moments, but plods along in step-by-step sequences that are not only unfunny but don't even inspire anyone to try acting funny. As the story progresses, the dialogue gets thinner – no loss here – until the story gives way to a string of musical vignettes. The comic side of *The Phynx* is a bust, but at least you would think that the musical element of the film couldn't fail in the hands of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, who had penned many classic standards in the 50s and already written songs for Elvis vehicles. Unfortunately, as they'd had no experience with late 60s bubblegum pop, the film's dozen or so songs become as unremarkable as the rest of the movie.

Finally, there are the four members that make up the titular band, who are so lacking in charisma that they should seek medical treatment (their movie careers began and ended with this one shot). It's quite an achievement not to be noticed in a film when you're the main protagonists, although by being bland the Flab Four did take a safer route than the rest of the cast who come across as self-conscious or tiresome (I felt like punching that Boy Scout kid and he only had three lines). The all-star bit players don't come off quite so badly as their dialogue is restricted to a few utterances each – and I admit it is kinda nice to see Johnny Weissmuller and Maureen O'Sullivan looking into each others eyes one last time. This means that most of the talking is left to Mike Kellin who plays SSA supervisor 'Bogey' (sic), but his Bogart imitation is so cornball that I didn't even catch on who he was supposed to be until he was mentioned by name. Impressionist Rich Little contributes his Nixon bit for the part of SSA boss 'Number One' and is the only performer to emerge unscathed, mainly because he wears a box over his head. The rest of the cast must have been envious.

Can there be any reason to watch it *The Phynx*, with so little to recommend it? Maybe just one: to peek into the passing of a bygone time, when such films were not only bankrolled but also capable of assembling a celebrity Who's Who. Films like *The Phynx* become attractive through their obscurity. It's the kind of nugget (the chicken kind, not the gold ones) you might discover on late night television by

chance, then think about several times over the years, discuss with others who don't know what you're talking about, recall hazy moments (What was that movie I saw that had a scene with spies looking for girls with maps on their bellies?), and finally think fondly of for its elusiveness. The fact it may be like an ephemeral moment in real life – there and gone again, never to be reclaimed – is the only thing *The Phynx* has going for it.

PLAYTIME (1967) 126m. After a decade's absence from the screen writer-director-actor Jacques Tati returned as his popular creation Monsieur Hulot for *Playtime*, an ambitious project which flopped at the time but was acknowledged years later as his *magnum opus*. A little more grey-haired than in his previous outing *Mon Oncle*, Hulot/Tati once again finds himself bemused by the march of progress, where so-called modern conveniences make life less easier than they promise. Set over one day and one night in a city which is nothing like the Paris we've seen in travel brochures, the plotless storyline relegates Tati to a supporting role (the first couple of times "Hulot" appears, it's not even the real article) leaving him to drift in and out of wandering coachloads of tourists. The sightseers are more interested in what's in the buildings than outside of them but ironically the same can be said about audiences who form the cult of this movie. *Playtime*, like *Blade Runner* and *Metropolis*, is one of those rare films that has earned a following through its architecture, in this case a uniformly clinical landscape of segmented geometric walls and glass aplenty. In order to get the look of his film right, Tati constructed an entire city block nicknamed 'Tativille'. The enormous cost of this project, and the poor return it generated, ensured he would not enjoy such creative freedom again; he would make only one more feature, *Traffic*, in his native France.

Playtime can be seen as the middle film in a trilogy of technological determinism, in which Hulot battles with a gadget-filled house (*Mon Oncle*), a featureless city (*Playtime*) and the proliferation of the automobile (*Traffic*). Tati's brand of humor is principally observational and well suited to the medium of cinema, and *Playtime* is a perfect example of his style. Many gags rely on camera placement (Tati enjoys using mirrors, glass, and reflections) and the frame is often static in order to let us notice everything that is going on within. This is emphasized in one sequence filmed as a frame within the frame, in which we watch people through the enormous window of their street-level apartment. This is a typical Tati setup in that a commentary plays out leisurely and with some subtlety (the joke is that these people are taking on the appearance of mannequins in some kind of 'Better Living' window display) but it also shows his partiality to linger – the gag is staged with precision, as is the rest of *Playtime*, but it's not that funny, slows down the flow of the film, and could make its point in one minute instead of ten (and in fact a shorter version of *Playtime* did play abroad for decades before its restoration).

The disorienting lack of close-ups or even mid-shots distances us from the characters and potential involvement in what is unfolding (in one high-angle sequence Hulot may as well be a rat in a maze), leaving *Playtime* with the risk of being an unfunny disaster. It's a difficult trick to pull off, but Tati manages it. There's a reason that almost all of this film is in long shot: it not only displays the expanse of the setting and element of farce (characters keep entering and leaving the frame) but also allows the idiosyncrasies of the large cast to emerge more naturally. Hulot departs from his usual role as a catalyst of events to instead become just one of many human beings dwarfed by technology, architecture, and order. These constraints finally give way in the most elaborate of all Tati's set-pieces, in which we see a newly-opened restaurant lose its semblance of decorum and become a rowdy affirmation of the human spirit. Ultimately, warmth and personality prevail over glass and concrete. Of course, regular Tati viewers would expect nothing less. The circus-like music and festive trappings of the film's final moments would make most of us quite happy to stay with Hulot and friends for a while longer, even in a place as hyper-orderly as Tativille.

POKEMON THE FIRST MOVIE (1999) 75m. I love the idea of middle-aged film critics who have paid their dues, worked their way up the ladder, and secured their credibility suddenly finding

themselves in child-packed audiences watching cartoons derived from a phenomenon that they find incomprehensible, all the time aware that they have to write about it afterwards. The dilemma: this is a product with a very specific target audience. To review it from a purely adult perspective would be uncharitable. To leave its verdict in the hands of the ten-year-olds it was pitched at would bring only the conclusions that "it sucked" or "it was cool", or perhaps a little of both, if the ten-year-old in question had any future vocation as a film critic.

I'm not a fan of *Pokemon* but I find it more watchable than several other cartoons of the time, although it's hard to tell what may have been 'improved' in translation (the English-language version is crammed with puns). For a start, the episodes are not stand-alone entries, but follow a story arc that enables minor developments to enter the growing storyline unobtrusively (this is why I imagine many adults find any randomly-tuned episode mystifying: *Pokemon* the series makes no apologies for the fact that you need to have been watching from the beginning – but isn't this true of many adult television series' also?). The characters, too, are a little more complicated than…well, let's say *Cow and Chicken*, why not? The central character, Ash, is overconfident, mulish, and has an obsession with Pokemon (a portmanteau of 'pocket monsters') that is destined for a major dysfunction. Ash's friend Brock, meanwhile, has a fetish with women in uniform that's downright embarrassing, leaving their female companion Misty to provide the sole voice of reason (their adversaries, a trio known as Team Rocket, are just as single-minded but far more entertaining). One can uneasily draw comparisons to the boy hero of this series and the Pokemon-crazed viewers watching him: each show begins with the signature tune "gotta catch 'em all", as simple a philosophy as you'd ever need when you're ten years old, and most likely the main reason this show has become so popular. Despite its complex narrative, the core purpose – to find Pokemon and train them – is what drives its appeal. Forming a roster of creatures from the Nintendo game upon which the cartoon was based, *Pokemon* offers its followers the irresistible urge to *collect*, either vicariously through Ash's adventures or more practically for a few bucks at K-Mart. The whole collecting bug doesn't just stop at the Pokemon themselves: once caught the creatures are then used as pawns in staged combat to aid Ash's further obsession to collect combat badges (this show has the moral stance of cockfighting) which in turn will allow him to enter a higher level of arena in the Pokemon League, and so on and so on.

It may be that the values of *Pokemon*'s protagonist tapped into the unconscious of a generation that compulsively watched the show and codified its critters without really knowing why. This at least is a more valid platform for criticism against the show than its supposed violence. Unlike *Power Rangers* and *Ninja Turtles* and other intense (though short-lived) television crazes, *Pokemon* wasn't the type of show that promoted rough play in the schoolyard. In fact, any kid wanting to emulate the combat routines of Pokemon is going to have their work cut out for them. Most of these monsters are just plain dorky and their attacks, reminiscent of the D&D role-playing game, diverse to the point of absurdity. Some sing to their opponents and then scribble on their faces when they're asleep; others kiss; create gusts of wind; cause headaches; throw leaves; blow bubbles. When it's time for the real fighting to get underway it usually involves a group of Pokemon hurling lightning bolts, water cannons, and flamethrowers at each other. It sounds lethal, and it probably is – but Pokemon don't fight to the death. At least not intentionally. At least not in any scenario we'll ever get to see.

But the show inevitably moved from the small screen to the big one, so where does this leave the First Movie? It's the same, but a little different. The candy colors of the TV show have gone, overwhelmed by shadows and voids. The tone is less frivolous, so gone too are the opportunities for the often hilarious combination of Team Rocket to play out their hapless schemes. As villains, they are outclassed by the newest and most powerful addition to the Pokemon catalogue, a genetically-created creature called Mewtwo. Unlike its kin, Mewtwo is a figure of evil, more of the Manga mold than Pokemon, and the film is slanted accordingly. It's an interesting move of the film-makers because it positions *Pokemon: The First Movie* as a 'safe' introduction to a more adult form of

Japanese animation, as if they were aware that their audience was growing older and that they needed to grow with it. Such themes synchronize with another significant element of the show, which in itself grew from simple beginnings like computer games and playing cards: Pokemon evolve from cuddly pets to more fearsome (but still tame) variations. This is usually accomplished unexpectedly in the heat of battle and takes but a few moments, as if a hormonal rush has given them the growth spurt to end all spurts. You can get as psychoanalytical about this as you want, but bear in mind that Ash's most precious creature, Pikachu, is unlikely to ever evolve into its mature counterpart. As strongly connected as they are to each other, Pikachu and Ash will always be children, never 'evolving' or growing out of their play-fight universe. It's about time they were shown a darker side of their world this time around, even if it has to bear forth the clumsy revelation that "Fighting Is Wrong!".

Pokemon isn't great, but it isn't bad either. Regular viewers will appreciate the in-jokes (e.g. "Who's that Pokemon?") and first-timers shouldn't have any problem keeping up with the story. The animation is serviceable, although not as eccentric as in the television series, and there are a couple of exciting action sequences involving a storm at sea and a panicky chase in a laboratory. There's also the rare appearance of Mew, the much sought-after Pokemon that was circulated among a small percentage of the Nintendo games – this movie no doubt boosted his popularity. Curious and playful, this powerful kitty will probably give even Pikachu a run for his money as the cartoon's unofficial mascot. After all, he is colored a newborn pink, emerges from an embryonic bubble in the ocean, and is even less likely in danger of ever growing up.

THE PORNOGRAPHERS (1966) 128m.

There's no sex or nudity in this dense film by Japan's Shohei Imamura, but it's still daring stuff for the mid-60s, and light years ahead of anything that had been produced by Hollywood. It's fun to imagine that Imamura, perhaps best known for his memorable 1982 version of *Ballad of Narayama*, spent four decades vying with fellow countryman Nagisa Oshima for a track record of controversial projects. I think Oshima earns the more notorious reputation, but he still would have been proud to claim this progressive feature for his own resume.

The film's subject matter is titillating – the daily life of a man (Shoichi Ozawa) who happens to make and sell cheap porn – but unlike another movies that use the porn industry as their setting *The Pornographers* shows little action on the front line. There's really so much else going on that it's hard to find a central theme to the story, and let's face it, the subject of sex in society can be debated without end. What I personally find interesting about the film is not so much the juxtaposing of the smut peddlers' occupation with their domestic lives, but the spillovers from one into the other. Does Ozawa become so unconsciously affected by his "profession" that he cannot tell that it is governing his behaviour around his family? Or has he always been like this from the beginning, consequently gravitating towards the porn business as a means of income? Shohei's film begins at a point where the crossover in this double life is becoming unbalanced (regardless of which "life" came first). Ozawa really is having a terrible time – he's a widower who has remarried another widow (who becomes hospitalized and has a breakdown), and is in love, or lust (or both) with his teenage stepdaughter. Meanwhile, he gets arrested by the police, intimidated by racketeering thugs, blackmailed by his stepson, and ripped off by his colleagues. Oh, and he also has problems with impotence, why not? Then there's the constant demand of his customers for his product. At first these requests seem kinky but when we see some of his clientele they look just as downbeat and confused as he is – it's obvious that these fellows use pornography as an escape from their static lives, and it's Ozawa's job to realize their sad little fantasies, albeit by the most expedient means at his disposal. Some of the scenes of Ozawa and his cronies at work are blackly comic, nearly all of them are ironic (the shoestring approach to their craft means cranking out a product in the most anti-erotic fashion possible), and one set piece, in which Ozawa borrows his stepdaughter's school uniform for a quickie shoot, is alternately funny, perverse, and appalling.

Near the film's end, Ozawa tries to live out his own fantasy and realizes that his business can ultimately

achieve nothing – the only way he can continue is to become part of the fantasy himself. His obsession throughout the closing chapter of the film is right out of left field! *The Pornographers* crosses boundaries that are startling for 1966, and its heady mix of sexual politics and tangled relationships requires repeated viewing. Sumiko Sakamoto and Keiko Sagawa play Ozawa's wife and daughter – like him, they're confused, and also seek answers in sex.

POUND (1970) 93m. There's something liberating about director Robert Downey's films, even when by rights they should be put on a leash by their small budgets and settings. Never was the case truer than in *Pound*, the kind of project that major studios would run a mile from. Long out of circulation, Downey's film populates a dog pound with different human characters who pace about their cage, uncertain about their future. Some wait in hope for their owners to redeem them, others plot to escape, but most wait to see if they will make it to the end of the day without getting 'The Needle'.

It seems like a cute gimmick to have human characters playing dogs, but Downey has never been one to play by the rules, even if they would provide an interior logic to his story. The dog-human switcheroo isn't as straightforward as it should be: the first camera angle inside the pound shows us the characters as dogs, the second shows them again as people. But are we still to treat them as 'dogs'? They have a TV set in their cage; can understand human speech; and are revealed in flashbacks as having human lives outside of the pound. It doesn't help that there's one real mutt in there with them, and made even more confusing when the flashbacks merge into fantasies. Are the dogs imagining they are human? Are they canine reincarnations of people who have lived previous lives? Is this a form of human hell? There is an 'afterlife' theme which includes scenes of the pound's inmates traveling on a train (a fairly standard death metaphor) and walking through the pearly gates. Does Downey even care about these ideas? Based on his track record, my guess is that he is just goofing around.

Pound was based on Downey's early off-off-Broadway production 'The Comeuppance', and it shows its stage origins – by the time the actors are all mugging and prancing about with complete abandon you may be reminded of those terrible, 'significant' dramatics you saw performed by art students on campus. Thankfully, Downey's humorous approach makes his movies more accessible and less pretentious than other underground, experimental, or avant-garde productions. For example: the different breeds of dogs are represented by different ethnic types (there's a cat and a bird thrown in, too), but it's just a gag, not a statement. The characters don't exploit the microcosmic setting by sharing ideologies but instead spout single-minded monologues, irrespective of what anyone else is saying. Nobody is listening to each other (just the way dogs would all yap in pound, I guess). There's also a background story about a sniper who kills random victims in the city, complaining that "it's too free" out there, but it's hard to tell what this has to do with the rest of the film and we don't take it seriously anyway (But if you want to be thrown a bone, how about 'Freedom is an illusion' 'Society has gone to the dogs', or 'It's a dog-eat-dog world, regardless of where you are'?)

Downey's fractured dialogue (all non-sequiturs, puns and one-liners), use of songs, wild humor, and broadly-played performances keep the first half of *Pound* energetic, but there are too many musical interludes and bizarre diversions in the second. Still, you can sense the fun that his stock company is having and it may get you interested in some of Downey's other films. The director's wife Elsie (a regular player in all his films) and two kids Allison and Robert Jr (as an angel and a puppy) add to the familial feel of the cast. It would be interesting to hear the reaction of a viewer who started watching this film halfway through and assumed that the characters were ordinary people incarcerated in a cell – now there's someone who would have a completely different perspective on the whole thing.

THE PRIVATE LIFE OF SHERLOCK HOLMES (1970) 125m. You can't see Billy Wilder's sly, colourful, and witty Sherlock Holmes film in its original 200-minute cut because United Artists, fearing that long epics were becoming *passé* with audiences, had it trimmed prior to release. Fortunately the film's episodic structure allowed it to be shortened without harming the story significantly.

Although never properly restored, bonus footage was released on home video decades later, which can be assembled into a near-complete version for personal viewing. In the film's beyond-the-grave prologue Dr Watson informs us that he is going to reveal stories about his friend Holmes that were never published during their lifetimes. If you didn't know about the earlier, longer cut of the film you might find this introduction puzzling, as there appears to be only one story in the film, preceded by an anecdote about a visit to the ballet. In fact the film was made up of three short cases (*The Upside-Down Room*, *The Russian Ballerina*, *The Naked Honeymooners*) followed by a feature-length mystery (*The Dumbfounded Detective*). Of these stories, only numbers two and four remain in the released print. Watson states that the reason he had never made any of these cases public was because of their delicate nature, but a more likely reason is that all stories show a failure on the parts of both Watson and Holmes to solve a legitimate criminal case: the first is a tricky red herring; the second is a deception; the third is misdirection. Only in the final story does Holmes get to flex his muscles, when the game is well and truly afoot.

Wilder and co-writer I.A.L. Diamond construct a delicious game for this final chapter – the story keeps accumulating disparate and baffling developments in a way that Conan Doyle would have been proud of. Robert Stephens and Colin Blakely shine as the crime-solving heroes – Blakely cheerfully occupies the template established by Nigel Bruce's Watson in the classic film series, and Stephens is dry and haughty as Holmes, yet also complex and troubled. Their dialogue, especially in their first scene together, shows that Wilder has still not lost his touch after thirty years in the film business. What I find admirable about *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* is that despite its mischievous tone the film is full of good will and respect for Conan Doyle's characters and stories. It's Wilder's most elegant and good-looking picture, employing a score by Miklos Rosza and shot on location in glorious widescreen. Wilder also hasn't lost his wicked sense of humour – the Russian Ballerina sequence is hilarious, capitalizing on the sort of revisionism that classic characters and stories often get subjected to by modern critics. The Honeymoon story is also amusing on two levels, as it simultaneously milks a farcical gag for all its worth (mistaken intentions feature predominately in this film) while deconstructing the whole process of Holmes' deductive reasoning. The original unreleased opening segment introduces a regular from the Holmes stories, Inspector Lestrade, to comic effect, but ends on a more serious note, with Holmes firing a pistol at his cocaine vials. It's a mini-conclusion which foreshadows the film's final moments, suggesting that Holmes' interest in solving crimes is not an escape from boredom, as he claims, but an escape from his inner torment. It's an unusual ending for such a light-hearted film, but don't hold that against it. If the opportunity ever arises to see this in a cinema with an audience, take it.

PUNISHMENT PARK (1971) 89m. This political SF employs the usual quasi-documentary style favored by its director, Peter Watkins, to depict an ultra-conservative America bent on rounding up (mostly young) dissidents and subjecting them to grueling tribunals that end either in imprisonment or a three-day ordeal in the desert known as Punishment Park. At no stage is the purpose of the park is satisfactorily explained: we are to believe that it is a training ground for police officers and the National Guard, whose task it is to track down and recapture the dissidents who have been turned loose in the desert. But I can't see how any such exercise involves useful skills on behalf of the pursuers – their quarry, who are a pretty fragile bunch, have to follow a predetermined route and don't pose much of a challenge for the armed and mobilized forces on their trail. Is the park nothing more than an excuse for organized sadism? The purpose behind the park – or at least the film's strategy of using the park – makes itself apparent when the activists argue amongst themselves about whether or not the whole thing is a set-up to shoot them all dead. Is the state just messing with their heads? It's an uneasiness we share with the characters because Watkins' convincing *cinema-verite* style contradicts what we know is a historical untruth.

The scenes in the desert become tense and genuinely scary: they are intercut with businesslike discussions among the assault forces and heated confrontations at

the tribunal. Towards the film's finale, Watkins loses the dispassionate voice he uses in his better-known films *Culloden* and *The War Game*, and becomes increasingly upset. Eventually his anger makes us question the point behind his film. It's undeniably well made, realistically acted, and arresting, but its agenda is unclear. At first he is condemning the Vietnam war, the brutal suppression of student protests, and possible dangerous trends in right-wing politics, but then abruptly switches to an out-and-out condemnation of the law enforcement mentality that such governments breed. These are, however, just the kinds of discussion points that Watkins wants to prompt. He wrote part of the story and improvised others with his non-professional cast, but most notably, quoted much of the tribunal statements from actual transcripts. It's a last grim touch that lifts this film out of the ordinary.

THE RAILWAY CHILDREN (1970) 108m.

Character actor Lionel Jeffries wrote and directed this heartwarming film based on E. Nesbitt's novel. It may remind you in spirit of Julio Cortazar's beautiful short story 'The End of the Game'. Set at the turn of the century, *The Railway Children* relates the adventures of three Edwardian children who move to a country house in Yorkshire after their father is mysteriously taken away by police. As their mother refuses to inform the children of the exact nature of their circumstances, the country retreat, with its stone cottages and buttercup fields, becomes a kind of balmy, nostalgic limbo. It's an inbetween world where the children must while away the hours until their father's return – if, in fact, he will return. The reason this classic is so popular must surely be because of its prewar innocence that nevertheless manages to capture elements of what it was like for urban and suburban Britons during the Blitz: there are children being relocated into the country by railway; a father absent from home on "government business"; a brave mother making do; a family playing at "being poor". This strong sense of reminiscence is established right from frame one – in the first few minutes of the film we see the camera pan lovingly over mementoes and trinkets; we see a photograph being taken, a Christmas dinner, a spinning zoetrope, a panto performance of Peter Pan – and while it is all rather sentimental, it never becomes mawkish.

It's wonderful how Jeffries creates an idyllic world that is entirely plausible, a world where strangers are kind and one good deed always deserves another. His splendid work is more than matched by a sterling cast. You'll really want to spend more time with these children and share their adventures – from the older sister Bobby (Jenny Agutter, who has just as much poise at 16 in a middy blouse or a pinafore as she would later as an adult), the younger sister Phyllis (A cheerful, brunette Sally Thomsett, who would later find fame as the dippy blonde Jo in the sitcom *Man About the House*, and was actually older than Agutter), and brother Peter (Gary Warren, who starred in the cult children's BBC serial *Catweazle*). Their performances are matched equally by the adults Dinah Sheridan and most notably Bernard Cribbins as a humble-yet-proud stationmaster.

This film has such a generous, humane spirit to it that you may feel your eyes mist over during several occasions. The finale is a guaranteed tearjerker, but I always get a lump in my throat at the very end when Agutter softly tells the audience "Goodbye", knowing as we do now that she could not have realized she was well on the way to becoming a celebrated and popular actress in the film industry. *The Railway Children* probably works even better now than it did then in 1970, as the nostalgia it evokes for those times works in tandem with the nostalgia of the story itself. They don't make films like this anymore. William Mervyn, as a train-travelling old gentlemen, sums it up in one word. "Charming...charming!" Footnote: Agutter, Thomsett, and their screen father Iain Cuthbertson were reunited a quarter-century later when the British Film Institute brought them back together to a cheering crowd at the Yorkshire Station, whereupon their film was commemorated with a plaque.

RAISING CAIN (1992) 91m. After feeling compromised during the production of his flop *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Brian De Palma went back to his roots and set to work on what was essentially a home movie. This unabashed reworking of his earlier thrillers and horror films was basically a 'Brian De Palma' film for a 'Brian De Palma' audience. It's silly but also one of his more enjoyable outings. John Lithgow, who has played nice guys and villains in other movies (including De Palma films), gets a shot at both this time around: he's Carter Nix, a self-effacing doctor, husband and father, and Cain, his evil twin. Just to round it off, he's also his father, a Norwegian scientist disbarred for doing unethical research on split personality. But wait – does Carter really have a brother or is he just letting a dissociated part of his personality get away with murder?

You can spot the twists coming most of the time in this movie, but De Palma throws in so many that it doesn't seem to matter. It's not as if he's giving you too much time to figure it all out anyway – the story starts moving right from the opening minute and doesn't slow down until his obligatory exposition scene in which a doctor delivers a long explanation to tie up most of the loose ends. *Raising Cain* doesn't waste time with any supporting characters – everyone who appears in this film is an integral part of it, and they are introduced one by one as the tricky storyline unfolds. De Palma keeps the pace of the film from flagging by using not only the flow of new characters but also diverse stylistic trademarks such as dream sequences, flashbacks, red herrings, slow motion sequences, shock appearances of characters into the frame and one of his lengthy one-take tracking shots (but not his usual split-screen effects which would be quite appropriate in this story!). And inevitably, there is a *Psycho* ripoff, although this time it isn't the shower scene (which he'd already done in three other films) but the sinking of a car containing a body.

Many of De Palma's regular viewers objected to *Raising Cain*, considering it lightweight, clichéd and unambitious. I think it's a very approachable film that works both as a valentine to the director's fans and as a user-friendly introduction for audiences unfamiliar with his earlier work. I'd hate to think that the reason for its dismissive reception was only because it was lacking in the nudity, sexism or bloodletting that often (but not always) marred De Palma's previous efforts. But then, De Palma is a director who has managed to annoy as many people as he's won over, so why should this movie be any different? *Raising Cain*'s climax is a multi-perspective sequence that stands out as the film's highlight even though it lasts less than a minute (when I first saw this in a theater the audience laughed and applauded). Unfortunately, this scene just doesn't work as well on television, although it might help if you collected a batch of like-minded friends to form your own 'Brian De Palma' audience.

THE RED TENT (1971) 121m. General Umberto Nobile (Peter Finch), an explorer whose airship, the *Italia*, crashed during a 1928 expedition across the Arctic, is visited 40 years later by spirits from his past who have gathered to judge him. These include Hardy Kruger as a mercenary pilot, Sean Connery as Roald Amundsen, and Claudia Cardinale, who looks as if she just dropped by on her way back from the hairdressers (Connery gets top billing but appears in only three scenes). This lengthy pre-credits sequence serves as a framing device for what is essentially a based-on-fact adventure tale that comprises the bulk of the movie. The film concludes with the assembled spirits – who are by now recognizable as key characters in the story – delivering their verdict upon Nobile.

Watching this film I can't help think that the producers must have fought the temptation to release two versions – one as it stands, and the other with all the present-day footage removed. This latter cut would certainly concentrate more on the dramatic survival scenes. But the film-makers seem to want to re-open the file on Nobile's story; to exonerate him somehow by presenting perspectives of history as seen then-and-now. The flashback structure seems ill-fitting because events from the past are not told exclusively from Finch's viewpoint, placing viewers in the position of accepting the spirits of the present (who are surely providing him with the full story) as real and not merely conjurations of his guilty subconscious. Why go to all the trouble of providing newsreel archives and authentic locations to establish a realistic atmosphere just to undermine its

credibility with a fantasy framework? Fortunately, the arctic landscapes are all too real, and a good anchor back to the world of fact: they are vast, beautiful, and foreboding, where human figures are reduced to black dots on the ice.

The Red Tent works best when it shows men grappling against the elements with barely-adequate technology. The scenes with the icebreaker, airplanes, and airship are all convincingly recreated – the initial crash makes for a gripping sequence. The strongest feature of any true-life survival film is that there can be no calculated script decisions over who will live and who will die, so (unless you've read up on your history) there's no sure way to know the outcome. The film's eccentric atmosphere will likewise keep you offguard. Movie buffs may find it quirky to see Kruger and Finch playing a scene together inside airship wreckage in the middle of the Arctic only six years after they were similarly stuck in the middle of the desert in *The Flight of the Phoenix*. Question to consider: If Nobile's expedition had been a success, would anybody have bothered to make a film about it?

THE RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD (1985) 91m. Dan O'Bannon, whose scripts always show inventive moments and wry humor, finally got the chance to direct with this suitably offbeat horror movie. Partly inspired by the zombie films initiated by George A. Romero, *Return of the Living Dead* elaborates wildly upon its predecessors. This isn't a sequel – it's a reinventing of how zombies had been seen on the screen up to that point. The film begins in a medical supplies warehouse (already, you begin to think "uh-oh") where newcomer Freddy is told by his supervisor the "truth" behind Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead*. Sure enough, curiosity leads to meddling, and before you can say "Braaaaiinns...", the dead have been reanimated and Freddy and his dropout buddies are surrounded by a horde of ghouls.

Return of the Living Dead uses the 'siege' scenario of the Romero stories, but ironically its protagonists shelter in different storehouses of death – the warehouse, a cemetery, a crematorium, and a mortuary. The dead are outside, in the land of the living; the living have barricaded themselves in the domain of the dead. O'Bannon keeps playing with this intermediary zone until we can't remember any difference between a living body that is slowly turning undead or a dead body that is struggling back to life. To blur the line further, *Return of the Living Dead*'s zombies don't act like the lethargic, green-hued somnambulists of other films that so distinctly separate themselves from their human victims. These zombies talk, move adeptly, and get organized. Added to that, several characters in the film aren't your normal band of sympathetic protagonists – their eccentricity, vulgarity, or nihilism doesn't make us care too much whether they join the ranks of the undead or not (with the exception of one girl-next-door type whose association with her friends seems very unlikely).

Return of the Living Dead was a revelation at the time – its style has been much imitated since, though it owes a debt to the hip, humorous horror of *An American Werewolf in London*. It manages the unlikely feat of turning a zombie film into an action piece; its demented plot veers in almost any direction right up until its conclusion. It has everything you could ask for in a zombie flick: splatter, rock music, and scream queen Linnea Quigley (who has surely fought more monsters than any other actor in living memory).

RIVER'S EDGE (1986) 99m. This moody film by director Tim Hunter and scriptwriter Neal Jiminez has an unsettling premise, but is populated with characters that are so dysfunctional they'll have you shaking your head in distanced amusement. But maybe that's the point. The story intersperses serious societal comment with black comedy: a teenager (Daniel Roebuck) kills his girlfriend and leaves her corpse on the riverbank. His high-school friends, including Matt (Keanu Reeves) and Clarissa (Ione Skye Leitch) find out, but their reaction is largely unemotional. Ironically, the only member of the group to get worked up about the incident (Crispin Glover) has sympathies that lie not with their dead schoolmate but with her killer.

River's Edge is about failure to communicate at every human level; the dead girl might as well be the toy doll or the blow-up dummy that also serve as friends/lovers and similarly end up pitched into the

river. It would appear that Reeves, who at least supports his little sister, is the chosen moral voice of this story, but there's also his high school teacher, who laments the loss of values he remembers as a student himself in the 60s. And then there's the reclusive, paranoid Feck (Dennis Hopper), an unlikely choice for moral spokesperson, who is one of only two characters (the other is Reeves) to make an act of judgment upon the killer. Feck provides a warped contrast between generations – he too once killed a girlfriend, but at least in the 60s it was done for love. It's a generation gap exemplified by Reeves' family, none of whom understand each other, all of whom ignore each other. Suitably, his 12-year old brother – the harbinger of the generation to come – is even more morally void than the teenagers surrounding him.

Hunter's film portrays society breaking down on every scale, whether it is generational, familial, or individual. What it says about its characters can be summed up by a design Reeves wears on his jacket – that of a peace sign superimposed over a skull. It is so arbitrary an icon that one can see how ideally it reflects the inability of Reeves and his friends to recognize choice. When the teenagers speak of hitting the road "just like *Easy Rider*" we know they have no intention of doing anything more than talk of it; when Leitch's teacher tells her that progressive times mean that she and her friends are destined to become career girls, she looks as if she'd rather not have any such opportunity handed her. It's not difficult to see these characters still living in their town twenty years in the future. Certainly that's the case for Hopper's Feck, who has spent twenty years isolated inside his own house – it's he and Glover who steal the show and provide the most eccentric moments in the film. The subdued photography by Frederick Elmes and score by Jurgen Knieper maintain a cool, barren, neutral atmosphere. The most disturbing aspect of the film is that it was based on a real-life incident in central California.

THE ROAD TO WELLVILLE (1994) 120m.

One-of-a-kind comedy by Alan Parker. It boasts Anthony Hopkins at his most eccentric and appears to be an attempt to redefine the screen presentation of toilet humor – because nearly every moment of the story is devoted to a bodily function or orifice. *The Road to Welville* is set at the turn of the century, when the popularity of Dr John Kellogg's new breakfast food, corn flakes, was part of a society fad for health and fitness. Two storylines look at both sides of the craze – the main one has Matthew Broderick, who has chronic indigestion, checking into Kellogg's sanitarium with wife Bridget Fonda, while the second story follows the attempts of John Cusack and Michael Lerner to break into the lucrative health-food market. We take our morning cereal so much for granted that we don't think twice about the impact that the novelty of 'breakfast food' might have had on its first appearance. Although he doesn't state it as such, Parker uses this idea to lampoon similar health crazes of contemporary times – the Victorian sensibility of going through personal suffering for a cleaner mind and body doesn't seem too far removed from the high-tech torture equipment of your local gym.

Delivering one hilarious organic metaphor after another, Hopkins makes for a spirited Kellogg. Every one of his scenes is a delight, especially those in which he confronts his rebellious, filthy son Dana Carvey – easily the biggest flake he was ever responsible for. The flashback scenes to their early family life are highlights. Kellogg's clinic puts every idea into practice – colonic irrigation, vegetarianism, aerobics, dietary restriction, mineral baths, surgery, and sexual abstinence. As if that isn't enough, some of the female clients opt to undergo a highly suspect 'therapeutic massage' by a neighboring German physician. *Welville* is consistently entertaining, but nevertheless overlong. It wouldn't have made much difference if the Cusack sub-plot had been cut entirely. As with many comedies, this one is an acquired taste. You may have to chew it over 23 times before swallowing.

ROBIN AND MARIAN (1976) 106m.

Director Richard Lester worked with several icons in his career (Superman, Butch Cassidy, the Beatles, and the Three Musketeers are among the more memorable) and this time around he turns his attention to Robin Hood. As would be expected from Lester, it is not a traditional portrayal. In essence, *Robin and Marian* provides all previous Robin Hood

films with a final chapter. Lester and screenwriter James Goldman replace images of young heroes galloping through the sward with middle-aged not-so-merry men eking out an existence in near-primitive conditions. The story opens with a disillusioned Robin renouncing his service to King Richard and returning to Sherwood after many years abroad. After losing his love of king and country he is now free to rekindle his desire for Marian. Ironically, it means he must once again become an outlaw, thus also renewing old ties with his former enemy the Sheriff of Nottingham.

It's bold of the film to avoid all previous representations of Robin and Marian: Robin (Sean Connery) is bearded, has thinning hair, wields a longsword more often than a bow, and dresses in shabby, practical clothes rather than his more customary Lincoln green. Likewise, Marian (Audrey Hepburn) is not a blushing maiden but a nun, trussed up so tightly in habit and wimple that for the first half of the film we see only her face. The younger Hepburn would have made a great Marian earlier in the heyday of Hollywood costumers, and it makes sense to presume this is why she was chosen for this role (her ten-year absence from the screen also suits the 'return' theme essential to the film). Yet she is required to play against type, which makes her casting confusing. It's not only Hepburn – all of the characters play against type: Marian is shown to be suicidal, the Sheriff is sympathetic, and Richard is psychotic. The only traditional element seen to remain steadfast is the romance between Robin and Marian.

Despite John Barry's suggestively romantic score (which Lester wasn't happy with) and the prevailing love interest of the leads, Lester's film still has that neutral quality found elsewhere in his work – neither too grim/realistic, or stylized/lavish. His trademark humor is also downplayed here. He and Goldman work with their material intelligently (although it's too easy to label a film 'revisionist' merely by subverting the identities of historical personages), but their film's success inevitably boils down to the connection between Connery and Hepburn. As in other Robin Hood stories, they get little screen time together, but in this instance it counts: their final scene is entirely memorable. It also brings home one of the primary intentions of the film – to break their characters out of archetypes perpetuated by myth (not to mention films and books) and present them as real people. The film's ending, which would have been unimaginable in the days of Errol Flynn, will be offputting to many viewers. Connery would return as King Richard in Kevin Costner's popular 1991 version.

ROBOT MONSTER (1953) 62m. With the films of Edward D. Wood Jr having undergone a posthumous lease of popularity, filmgoers are now more willing to invest time in other, similar 'bad movies'. A prime candidate for some attention is surely *Robot Monster*, a Phil Tucker-directed effort (I use the term perfunctorily) that always gets unintended laughs from audiences. Story shows us the attempts of Ro-Man, the monster of the title, to eradicate the last six humans remaining on Earth in order to prepare it for colonization by his fellow monsters, also from the planet Ro-Man (and not Ro-Planet, which might make more sense).

Don't expect any logic from this scenario. Why the entire invasion fleet has to be put on hold because of the presence of a few humans is never explained, but you won't be concerning yourself with such trivial details once you get a look at the monster. Ro-Man is an inspired combination of a gorilla suit, deep-sea diver's helmet and portable television aerial. The sight of Ro-Man waddling through the rocky canyons of LA (where the film was shot in its entirety), swatting irritably at bushes that aren't even in his way, has got to be one of the classic images of Z-grade cinema. Poor Ro-Man's main purpose in the film seems to be to walk from one end of the canyons to the other, and it's only a matter of time before we stop thinking about the monster and start wondering what imprecations are being muttered by the actor trapped underneath the heavy, ungainly costume. That Ro-Man's outfit is not designed for running is obvious, given that his victims, in order to be attacked, have to walk right up to him or else stumble over while running away.

Robot Monster is a little slow to start (it's mainly Ro-Man being berated by the Great Leader, who for some reason can't talk to him without shaking his fist – he must be the most nagged monster in movie

history), but by the time Ro-Man has gotten designs on the heroine ("The one they call Al-ice"), it's a riot. *Robot Monster* doesn't have the pitfalls of *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, with which I have twice seen it double-billed, but that's only because it's not as ambitious: there's no need for sets or a cast of more than half a dozen. In the long run, it looks like what the TV series *Lost in Space* might have churned out if they were told they could make a feature film. The biggest irony of the movie is that by the end of it you realize that the whole story has been viewed through a child's perspective, and that consequently the banal – and surreal – nature of the story, simple dialogue (there's never a scientific term mentioned), and superficial characters make perfect sense. In that respect, it's almost a perfect crystallization of the logic of children's fantasies or nightmares. But unfortunately for the film makers, it's much easier to just laugh at. As I have only seen screenings with audiences, I wouldn't know how well the unintentional humor will translate to television. Unbelievably, this film was originally released in 3-D. But you'd never guess it: there is not one instance of this process being exploited in the movie. With the possible exceptions of Alice's tight top, and the lettering of the title.

ROMEO AND JULIET (1968) 138m. A beautiful adaptation of Shakespeare that has a place in many moviegoers' hearts. While I love Bernstein's musical version *West Side Story*, and enjoy Baz Luhrmann's flippant, shrieking, MTV-style 1996 update, there is still no substitute for this Franco Zeffirelli gem. Shakespeare's classic love story doesn't fit the modern-dress scenario as well as his tragedies or history lessons, no matter how timeless or relevant his themes may be: the notion of romance is too strongly intertwined with sentiment, innocence and longing – qualities we associate with an irretrievable past – to make the transition successfully. So while the contemporary setting of 1996's *Romeo + Juliet* makes for great cinema, its own flashiness ultimately denies it emotional resonance: it presents Romeo and Juliet's world as so superficial, violent, and cheerless that you can't blame them for wanting to leave it. Their death scene is no tragedy, merely an exit. Zeffirelli's Renaissance Italy, on the other hand, is a place any of us could be perfectly happy to live in.

It's hard to imagine a more definitive version of the play – this film is how Shakespeare himself would have envisaged it, a world of sundrenched piazzas, masked balls, rowdy swordsmanship, bustling marketplaces, moonlight, meadows, and passion. But most importantly, teenagers were finally trusted with the roles of the two lovers – I cringe at those adult 'Hollywood' actors strutting across the stage and going through all the motions in earlier film versions, because more than anything Romeo and Juliet are two hormonally-charged adolescents who are swept away not only by each other, but by the mere idea of being in love. Leonard Whiting is a naive, impulsive Romeo; Olivia Hussey is the girlfriend of every boy's dreams – voluptuous, spirited, and stunningly beautiful. Together they represent everyone who ever wanted to rebel against the dogmatism of their parents and improve the way of the world. This was surely a message that the Woodstock generation took personally – these two youthful, optimistic heroes were seen to endorse their views on peace, freedom, sex, and love.

Zeffirelli's eye for detail presents us with an entirely believable milieu – all his characters seem so real and natural it's easy to forget they're speaking Shakespeare. Every moment Whiting and Hussey are together on screen they are completely alive – you'll know what all-consuming love is, just as you'll sympathise with them every moment they are apart. The film's final scenes are among the cinema's most heartbreaking – even after three cinema screenings they still choke me up. Nino Rota's well-known and popular score contributes enormously. Pat Heywood also features as a robust nurse and Michael York plays a cocky, pugnacious Tybalt. It won Oscars for cinematography and costumes.

RUN LOLA RUN (1998) 81m. This guaranteed big-screen crowd-pleaser from writer-director Tom Tykwer was a welcome change from the Teutonic gloom normally imported from Germany for film festivals. Its premise reads like a parallel universe joke, but is executed like a music video: Vermilion-haired Lola (Franka Potente) gets a panicky phone call from her boyfriend Manni (Moritz Bleibtreu). He needs to come up with 100,000 marks in twenty minutes or his life is forfeit. Using only a moment to think what to do, Lola immediately hot-foots it out of her apartment to save him. This energetic, rocket-paced film dispenses with its plot in those twenty minutes – as promised – but then whips everything back to where it started to replay it a second, and then third time. It seems that everything we do in life is so contrived of the most infinite circumstances that this story can replay itself endlessly with infinite

conclusions: even the people Lola passes in the street have different destinies that are compressed to flash by us in seconds.

Despite the threat of assassination that hangs over the proceedings, *Run Lola Run* is very light, and abounds with humorous twists and surprises (one hilarious moment finds Lola outside a bank confronted by the police). Appropriately, Tykwer has treated the exercise as a game: there is no need for us to be concerned about the lives or deaths of these characters as they are constantly re-invented. He also has remixes of the same tune throughout the film complementing the 'variations on a theme' storyline. And, notably, the cause-and-effect logic of the story is punctuated by constant collisions or near-misses – nearly everyone has a run-in with a car, bicycle, truck, ambulance, pedestrian, or stroller as if they were so many hypercharged electrons bumping off each other, splitting and merging into their own quantum-level parallel universes. Another admirable element of the film is its purely cinematic value – you'll be so caught up in its constant movement (of course the only shot of the sky just has to have a passenger jet swooping by) that you probably won't even notice the absence of special effects. Using every crane trick, slow-motion, pixillation, camera angle and editing device at his disposal Tykwer manages to pull off a highly visual treat created almost entirely within camera. It's prime material for some needless, overbudgeted Hollywood remake. And yes, Lola really does run. Potente must have been exhausted by the time this shoot was over.

RUNAWAY TRAIN (1985) 111m. I don't know why, but I find it easy to remember most films that have a train as the central setting from start to finish. Looking back on it, most of them are thrillers, with *Runaway Train* being part of that company while being noticeably different in that its train carries only three passengers confined to one small room. The premise is simple: a couple of cons break out of a prison isolated in barren, icy wilderness, and make their getaway on a train which turns out to have no driver. Jon Voight plays a hardened lifer whose ongoing feud with the sadistic prison warden has made any kind of risk more preferable than a jail term. Voight gives 100% as usual, but I don't think even he would have expected to have received an Oscar nomination for his performance. Before we meet Voight, we are briefed about how violent and uncontrollable his character is – so feared is this man that the door of his cell has been welded shut. The unsealing of this door in the film's opening scenes is done with the usual entourage of armed guards and hammering musical score to make it quite clear to us how much of a Bad Dude this guy is. But really, it's just too much. Voight's performance is good enough on its own legs to deem such dramatic buildup unnecessary, and in fact he sidesteps such trimmings altogether (the amplification of his character could of course be solely the work of the Chief Warden, whose hatred of him is irrational to the extreme). The escape from the prison itself is as basic as all-get-out (laundry basket – sewer crawl – cross-country run) but the break is done as quickly as possible just to get Voight and younger prisoner Eric Roberts outside the walls so they can spend the rest of the movie on the train, where they consequently meet stowaway Rebecca De Mornay, who should look out of place in such company, but somehow doesn't. It could be that the point of the film is to have the characters, in one intense moment where they all lose control, share a moment of clarity and realise what they are, where they are, and what is happening, as if they were predestined to be on a train, similarly out of control, that could well be taking them on a final journey.

The most interesting aspect of *Runaway Train* for film buffs is that is was originally a project undertaken by great Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. He never got past the scripting stages, and the story was surprisingly picked up by exploitation specialists Golan-Globus and given to Andrei Konchalovsky, a relative newcomer to Hollywood who had directed only a couple of action pics beforehand (maybe they figured a Russian director would have less problems getting the job done in the rugged Alaskan locations). While *Runaway Train* does balance action and philosophy quite neatly (which means that the story can end almost any way without seeming unsuitable), it's still intriguing to wonder how differently Kurosawa would have handled it (I'm sure he would have applauded the shots of the train speeding through the forbidding

frozen landscape). Best of all, it's a real train in real wide-open spaces – no matte shots, models, or CGI; and with digital home theatre it can be enjoyed on a big screen without having the ride on the train interrupted by commercial breaks.

THE SADIST (1963) 92m. In the midst of the piffle produced by the low-budget exploitation trio of James Landis (director), Arch Hall Jr (actor and wannabe pop singer) and Arch Hall Snr (producer and nepotist) appeared this surprisingly efficient suspense flick. The key to its success is the decision by Arch Hall (both of them) to take time out from Junior's grooming as a movie matinee idol and cast him as a sniveling creep. Apart from a little racooning around the eyes, Hall Jr doesn't appear much different here than from his other guises as ladies' man or rock star in his Dad's other movies, which proves all the more that he should have made the switch to character acting, even if he would have ended up playing heavies for most of his career. If you see Hall for the first time in this movie, you'll see what I mean: even though his broad nose and monobrow – classic hallmarks of the b-movie thug – are at odds with his pampered bouffant of blond hair, he is a memorable villain, mugging furiously throughout, grinding his teeth, leering, squinting, scrunching up his nose, giggling, talking in a sing-song voice, walking as if he's constipated and giving a performance that would be terrible if we didn't believe that the character he plays was immature enough to behave in such a manner in the first place.

The story is a simple one – really it's just a situation: three people on their way to a ball game become stranded in an auto yard in the desert, soon to discover that a young psychopath and his girlfriend have gotten there first. When Hall first appears we see only his gun filling most of the screen: it's clear that he needs this prop to give him authority, and behind its safety he sneers to the other (older) males in the film as 'big talkers' and 'big men'. As Charlie Tibbs (inspired by 50s thrill killer Charlie Starkweather) Hall is just a big kid who drinks Cokes, necks with his girlfriend (a simple-minded babyface who never speaks), rejects his parents, hates school and fears cops (the only adults in the small cast are teachers and policemen). This guy is the playground bully of your worst dreams. The acting at the beginning of the picture is stilted (the heroine Helen Hovey keeps bleating out leading questions to inform us just how nasty Hall is, and potential victim Richard Alden's idea of avoiding a casual execution is to declare "Surely blowing my head off can't give you a thrill") but becomes less noticeable as the story starts knuckling down. The tension of *The Sadist* is maintained because (1) we can't see anything changing or developing, (2) the good guys spend nearly the whole movie being held at bay by the point of a gun, and (3) the restrictive atmosphere of the auto yard (encircled by wrecked cars) keeps reminding us that these people are going nowhere. What's more, this suspense is justified by some surprising moments that most other movies wouldn't even consider.

Landis shows skill with his limited budget, proving his dexterity with both dramatic and action scenes. If *The Sadist* had crossed over from the exploitation circuit and into the mainstream, he may well have ended up with a studio contract. As it turned out, he was soon back with his old cronies making the decidedly unenthusiastic *Nasty Rabbit* instead. Ironically the only member of the cast and crew to break into a Hollywood career was cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond, who started out with this movie and stayed in B-Grade limbo until he struck gold with *McCabe and Mrs Miller*.

SALO, OR THE 120 DAYS OF SODOM (1975) 115m. I've yet to read more than two pages of the infamous Marquis de Sade volume on which this film was based, but that's still enough to establish the cataloguing of carnality and scatology that appears to be the book's *raison d'etre*. After working his way ever more deeply into controversial subject matter such as sex, religion, and politics, director Pier Paolo Pasolini finally decided to go the whole hog and make a film from a text which single-

handedly defined the term 'unfilmable'. He would be bludgeoned to death near a soccer field shortly after filming was completed, making this his final opus – but after *Salo* he would have been hard pressed to come up with material for an encore.

Salo starts with gorgeous, summery photography of rural Italy but quickly moves indoors and stays there for the duration of the story. This is Italy under fascism in the 1940s, and the mansion that is the central set of the film plays host to a number of appalling aberrations beneath its sunny skies. In Pasolini's restructuring of the original text, a group of wealthy, corrupt fascists have rounded up young Italians and imprisoned them within a large country estate in order to play out the De Sade book as if it were a type of instruction manual (Pasolini actually kept his cast inside the mansion for nearly two months of shooting). Whether or not they hope to learn something more about their own baser nature isn't even a subject for consideration as they humiliate and torture their hapless prisoners relentlessly. *Salo* is, by its subject, a confrontational film, and was banned outright in different countries. I think the charges brought against it are less a result of what is shown on screen than the sense that it appears so studiously committed to its own moral vacuum. You'll see more graphic sex and violence in other films but these are usually punctuations within a wider context – in *Salo* these elements are present constantly. Not for one moment are we offered any relief from the emotional and psychological torment being inflicted upon the fascist's victims, and just when we think the film is all bark and no bite, it offers a final scene that is horrific not only for what it portrays but because it can be the only logical conclusion.

I believe that *Salo* is not as controversial for its content as it is for the conditions it imposes upon the viewer from the outset: that there is no hope, that there will be no rescue, that these young people will suffer and that we will be witness to every moment of it. Because we accept these conditions and view on regardless we get the feeling that we are conspiring with an agenda of the film-makers. Is it a film that exists more in the reaction to its content than the content itself? Is the event of the film emulating the anarchic argument behind De Sade's own scandalous writings? What's problematic with *Salo* is that by means of blasphemy, cruelty or depravity it positions itself as a dialogue with which the audience cannot help but engage, overwhelming conventional attitudes of storyline or character. I also can't help feeling that Pasolini's decision to update the text to a wartime setting is pure strategy on his part, as if allegory conveniently excuses his indulgence. It's not a film that should be banned (there were lines around the block when I went to see it), or that people should be discouraged from seeing, or that most people should be encouraged to see, for that matter. Ultimately, despite its controversy, I'm left with a muddled reaction to *Salo*. It's certainly disturbing, but probably for the wrong reasons. Just as De Sade's book tells you more about the man who wrote it than the work itself, so too do I think less of *Salo* as a film than the end-product of the man who made it.

SAMMY GOING SOUTH (1963) 128m.

When ten-year old Sammy walks out of his front door one morning he has no idea that he is going to keep walking until he traverses an entire continent. Suddenly alone and homeless after an incident in Port Said, Sammy (Fergus McClelland) decides that the simplest course of action is to visit an aunt in Cape Town. He knows this is going to be quite a journey, but has the benefit of being ten years old and geographically clueless. The concept of simply walking from one place to another is the simplest in the world – so why not do it? While not exactly a children's film, *Sammy Going South* is perfect viewing for kids in the way it reduces the scope and complications of what would otherwise be a logistically complex operation into an instinctual migration. Sammy wants to go to Cape Town; Cape Town is south of Port Said; Sammy has a compass that points south. It's just a matter of walking until you can catch a lift on any bus, train, boat or donkey available, and having enough money to pay for food along the way when the supply of fruit trees runs dry.

Director Alexander MacKendrick, who would helm one of the best child-oriented 'rite of passage' movies two years later with *A High Wind in Jamaica* has a switch of gender (a boy instead of a girl) and location (dry land instead of an ocean) but handles the material just as deftly, even if *Sammy* doesn't

have the layering of *Jamaica*. We first see Sammy crawling on the floor like a baby while his parents remain out of frame (with the exception of one significant closeup), suggesting that he must learn to stand on his own two feet – to become 'a boy ten feet tall' (the film's alternate title). Never sentimental or cute, and acting just like a child really would, McClelland provides a curiously neutral core to the story, neither wholly likeable or unlikeable. Because we are being steered through the story purely by Sammy, we are subject to events in an unsophisticated way – we can't be sure of the intentions of adults around him, and neither can he. In this kids-eye-view of the world, keeping hold of your money and avoiding a visit to the dentist are more immediate concerns than dealing with cross-continental journey through formidable terrain.

The film becomes a little pat when McClelland runs into Edward G. Robinson's character – the geographical journey stops at this point, and Sammy's inner journey takes over – who becomes his surrogate father figure. Robinson, who took on more paternal, sagacious roles later in his career (are there many other actors who can say "Jumpin' Jehosaphat!" like they mean it?), manages the difficult feat of entering the story, and thence interrupting the journey, halfway through without seeming like an unwelcome plot turn. Having no heirs of his own, he wants to recreate the opportunities for Sammy that he had when he was younger. Sammy, who began his trek to find a mother substitute (his Aunt Jane), settles instead for a father substitute, but takes it a step further by wanting to assimilate his new mentor's lifestyle and duplicate his experiences (more metaphorically, he also 'inhabits' his mother by killing a female leopard and wearing its skin). Eventually the movie shifts its focus away from Sammy and the storyline accommodates other characters and their own intentions. In the closing scene of the film Sammy may no longer be lost geographically, but appears to have learned nothing from his experiences, so our ambivalence towards his character remains. Filmed on real locations with a minimum of sets, *Sammy* is fine to look at – though it is annoying that it takes nearly all of the film's running time to get halfway through the journey, only to have the last half dispensed with offscreen in a matter of seconds.

SANDS OF THE KALAHARI (1965) 119m.

A chartered plane makes a forced landing in the Kalahari desert, stranding its six passengers (five men and one woman) on a rocky outcrop in the middle of nowhere. This gripping, existential adventure borrows from Nietzsche and Darwin and is unlike any other survival story you will have probably seen. It seems at first that the survivors in this case will not have to struggle too hard to stay alive – they find shelter, food, and water less than a day's hike from the downed plane. Nor do they seem concerned about possible search parties or rescue attempts. But then the group dynamics set in. Susannah York, the only female, is the most obvious catalyst for unrest among the other survivors. In a godless world a leader must emerge to take charge - and a mate. It's plain that we're meant to make the connection between the group of people huddled together among the rocks and the tribe of baboons that also colonize the outcrop. The survivors are back at the dawn of humanity (this film will make you think of *2001*), living in a cave (with pre-supplied paintings), hunting animals, and competing for dominance in their habitat. That they have intruded upon the baboons' domain is clear: the apes are always seen from high up on the rocks, staring at the people below, barking harshly and baring their fangs. Humans are right back down near the bottom of the food chain. As O'Brien (Stuart Whitman), the most energetic of the group, tells them, they are nevertheless equipped for survival because they are more intelligent. But O'Brien has a feral quality that doesn't stay hidden for long. "He's the only one of us who belongs here," York says early in the piece. It's a signpost remark, and a little too pat, as are other observations tossed off by the characters, who voice ideas and themes in the movie as if they were supplying answers to an essay question on it.

There is still plenty to think about afterwards, nonetheless: are characters meant to be thought of as villains because they are more capable of survival than others? Sturdevan (Nigel Davenport) behaves like an absolute pig mere moments before he casually decides to undertake a dangerous journey that may

save the others; the oldest member of the group (Harry Andrews), whose scientific knowledge provides much reassurance for the others, turns out to be have been a soldier working for the Nazis; and while we condemn O'Brien's cold-blooded, methodical exploitation of everyone else in the group it's easy to forget that it was he who rescued their only survival equipment from the burning wreckage of the plane. Lastly, there is York, the character we associate most strongly with civilization (she's even named Grace), who at first only wants love but then gives in to her sexual desires. She doesn't become as independent and assertive as we would hope. Theodore Bikel and Stanley Baker round out the rest of the survivors. With so much individual discrepancy it's not surprising that we rarely see the same two characters playing scenes together. Their constant interchange is a useful device to keep the pacing of the film brisk. This, and the effective location shooting, makes the story very watchable. You won't be expecting the provocative ending.

THE SAVAGE INNOCENTS (1959) 110m.

A doozy of a film by Nicholas Ray, unlike anything else in his catalogue. Its straightforward tale of life in the Arctic Circle finds Inuit hunter Inuk (a believable performance by Anthony Quinn) trying to settle down with a wife and make sense of his recent contact with white traders who have established a post several months journey from his hunting grounds. This story could have been incredibly trite but the intelligent screenplay (by Ray) manages to keep it one step ahead of many other Hollywood dramas set in exotic locales. The only time it falters is when an unnecessary and annoyingly folksy narrator (you'll feel like strangling him), who could have been lifted straight out of a Disney True-Life Adventure, keeps interrupting and explaining the characters' behavior. This wouldn't have been done if the film had been made today, but the film-makers apparently felt the need to inform the audience that they had done their homework on 'Eskimo' lifestyles. Also, the narration serves to add a documentary flavor to their story. But why bother? Probably because the producers did not want to be stuck with a film centered on characters that viewers found too alien and were unable to identify with. Perversely, the voice-over nearly spoils any authenticity the film tries to maintain. Besides, it's more fun listening to the quirky speech patterns of the Inuit characters than any narrator (they do not use the personal pronoun "I"). It's this dialogue, more than any other device, that establishes the film's distinctive, alien milieu.

When Inuk and his wife – whose point of view directs the story – first encounter rudimentary elements of white civilization, we get two alien worlds/viewpoints for the price of one. The conflict of values, which governs the narrative drive from halfway through the film, provides the major theme of the story. It's hard to tell if Ray is more interested in this plotline or the punctuation of rituals throughout it (we see rituals for death, birth, eating, hunting, etc). They at least give him an excuse to be incredibly daring for 1959 – in what other film of that time does the leading lady bare her breasts? – and Ray could portray attitudes toward sex more frankly on screen in this quasi-documentary fashion than he could with his contemporary social dramas. Some must have found the portrayal of the permissive Inuit lifestyle scandalous, surely the main reason Rank distributors opted to back the project in the first place. What's the bet they considered calling it 'The Innocent Savages' first up? Watch for an uncredited and dubbed Peter O'Toole making his screen debut – he'd reach superstar status three years later when he was reunited with Quinn in *Lawrence of Arabia*. There's some debate whether this movie was the inspiration behind the pop song 'The Mighty Quinn'.

SECOND SIGHT (1994) 93m. Jostedalen, 1349. 14th-Century Europe is ravaged by the Black Death, but Norway is one of the hardest hit nations, losing nearly two thirds of its population in the plague's wake. Even given these astonishing figures, you'd think that seven-year-old Maren (Julia Onsager Steen) would have had at least one or two survivors to keep her company after the pandemic strikes her family and friends. But no, Maren is the only one to be spared. If you've ever wanted to view a film that depicts a young girl wandering about a picturesque valley alone reciting rhymes to herself, then this is that movie, and not much else. The 'second sight' of

the title refers only to the final scenes, in which Maren is found by neighboring villagers and attributed with clairvoyant powers (she wears her 'birthcap', or umbilical membrane, as an amulet). It's a talent she's not sure she wants, or even has, although like everyone else in her world she puts her faith in the powers of the arcane for survival. Almost the only time we ever hear her talk is when she is chanting to drive away wolves, bears, or maleficent spirits. *Second Sight* draws an interesting correlation between the talismanic manifestations of child logic and the belief systems of the medieval era *per se*. It's fascinating to see her single-handedly and unconsciously keeping the ritualistic sensibilities of her culture alive, even though we now know these beliefs to be misinformed and doomed.

The lack of incident in the film might be overlooked if it was meant to be, say, a lyric piece, or an experience of awakening, but it strives for neither. This makes me think that its portrayal of events is intended to be as simple as any medieval tale would aim to tell it. It could be that director Ola Solum wants his story to reach us at a primal level: we are not watching a story, we are merely watching life. Whatever, this leaves young Steen with the task of carrying the bulk of the film, and she's not given a lot to do other than look anxious and shout the occasional verse. However, she makes a believable peasant girl (it's amazing what a liberal application of dirt can do) and looks right at home in her setting – I didn't realize how taken in I was by her performance until the final freeze-frame. The surrounding countryside is also suitably wild and medieval: Solum employs a vertiginous handheld wide-angle lens to good effect. Director Anja Breien wrote the screenplay. Jan Garbarek supplied the rather eclectic score.

SHINE (1996) 104m. The true story of David Helfgott, a teenage pianist who won a scholarship to The London Royal College of Music, had a nervous breakdown, and returned home to Australia a forgotten recluse (although after the Australian release of this film, the public showed a renewed interest in him and he responded with a successful nationwide tour). Three actors play Helfgott – as a boy, a teenager, and an adult – but it's the latter performance by Geoffrey Rush that's the most absorbing. How much time did Rush and scriptwriter Jan Sardi spend with the real-life Helfgott to capture his flustered, stream-of-consciousness speech so naturally? Rush's performance is such a powerhouse one (he doesn't use a hand double for the piano-playing sequences) that it's easy to overlook the similarly fine turns by his younger incarnations. And don't forget Scott Hicks' seamless directing job – it would be tempting for any director to use the tormented genius premise as an excuse to go over the top, but Hicks keeps a tight rein on his story.

The film's emotional core is harder to pin down – clearly it must be Helfgott himself, but since he has been repressed by his father (Armin Mueller-Stahl), a Polish Jew whose own father denied him access to a musical instrument, he's not given to emotion easily (until his wordless, memorable final scene on stage). Also, it's kind of difficult to empathize with (a) mental instability, and (b) musical genius. The emotional focus of the story is instead directed toward Helfgott. Everyone he comes in contact with responds to him positively; everybody loves him – writer Katharine Prichard (Googie Withers), his mentor Cecil Parkes (John Gielgud, still going strong), his wife-to-be Gillian (Lynn Redgrave), and his family. Despite all the feel-good overtones, *Shine* never gets sappy, sentimental, or manipulative. The most pertinent point to consider after viewing is why no explanation is offered for the cause of Helfgott's dysfunction. Was it simply too much strain that led to a mental collapse? Were his problems impressed on him from the start by his obssessive father? Was it purely medical in cause? Or are we to be left with the assumption that genius goes hand-in-glove with its own special madness? As the film doesn't say one thing or another about any of these possibilities it is the last one that might leave you with the strongest impression, and since the expression 'shine' is never equated with Helfgott during the course of the film it's natural to assume that it refers to the light of his talent which burned too bright and too fast. Or perhaps he 'shone' because his father was part Polish. I know, I know. I'm sorry... it was too hard to resist.

THE SHINING (1980) 140m. How could any

movie live up to a publicity campaign that culminated with full-page newspaper ads in the Southern Hemisphere blaring 'The tide of terror that swept the world is here'? Stanley Kubrick's only horror film, an adaptation of Stephen King's bestseller, was a disappointment for first-time audiences who were expecting to be scared out of their wits, but grew to be a more rewarding film for repeat viewers. The film begins with caretaker Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson), wife Wendy (Shelley Duvall) and son Danny (Danny Lloyd) moving into a Colorado Hotel which is closed and inaccessible during the winter – Jack figures he can use the months of isolation to work on a novel. The film ends with Jack running amok with an ax, howling for his family's blood. What happens in between? That's *The Shining*'s main controversy. The other area of controversy, at least for those Kubrick fans who had been weaned on the philosophical/ideological complexities of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *A Clockwork Orange*, was that *The Shining* was too simple – it just seemed to be a ghost story about a man who went nuts in a hotel, so what was the big deal?

After initial mixed feelings about the film, King joined its critics, finally agreeing to say nothing further in exchange for the rights to produce his own television version. In King, the cause of Jack's switch from father to murderer is clear-cut: he and his son are telepathically sensitive to a host of evil spirits that haunt the Hotel. In Kubrick, it's much murkier. He sets up a number of horror-movie motifs and then brushes over them – clairvoyance, ax murders, ghosts, a pact with the devil, insanity, animated corpses, ghosts, and reincarnation (to cap it off, he has the family move into the Hotel on Halloween). Every supernatural event can be explained rationally – here the telepathy becomes a conduit not for entities but hallucinations. Kubrick offers many other alternatives for Jack's madness – the isolation, his frustration as a writer, the cabin fever that has him trapped in the Hotel, his alcoholic past. Is Jack conjuring up his own demons? Has the Hotel become a sort of magnifying lens that expands hallucinatory images and passes them on in a form of autosuggestion to everyone else staying there? We can't trust any image that we see as real, although as viewers we are too caught up in events to give this much thought. It's only afterwards that you'll likely see the only piece of the puzzle that doesn't make sense – that if this was all happening in the characters' minds, then who let Jack out of the room he was locked in?

The Shining is a horror film to admire for its atmosphere, not its frights, although many fans enjoy it for Nicholson's pumped-up performance. It's hard to tell what may have attracted Kubrick to a mainstream horror novel, but I suspect it was the setting that clinched it. In *The Shining* the idea of the haunted house is turned completely inside out. Gone are the dark corridors, the narrow staircases, musty attics, dank cellars and scary woods outside. Instead, the Hotel is immaculate, huge, and illuminated, surrounded by empty white wilderness. There is barely a shadow to be seen. At the one point in the film when a character (Danny) enters darkness it is treated not as a place to be feared but as an area of refuge, only to have it become lit up with floodlights. John Alcott's cinematography and Kubrick's precise camerawork make *The Shining* a visual treat – which is quite something when you consider that it is shot mostly indoors. There is some great floor-level Steadicam tracking that follows Danny as he cycles through the hallways, and a memorable cutaway shot of Jack staring at the Hotel maze, which is worth the price of admission alone.

In discussion *The Shining* is often companioned with *2001* (and not just because they share the same running times and a four-act structure). It's an intriguing comparison – inner space versus outer space. If the Star Child at the conclusion of *2001* was meant to signal an evolved consciousness of humanity then it's easy to see *The Shining*'s clairvoyant child, Danny, as being its flesh and blood incarnation. The Hotel is his new, mysterious universe; an arena in which he may flex his fledging powers. Meanwhile Jack, who regresses to a grunting, animalistic state by the film's conclusion, returns full circle to *2001*'s apes. In both films we see points of evolution represented not only by characters but also by the weapons they use (in *The Shining* it progresses from club to knife to ax). There is also an obvious metaphysical link between both films – Kubrick likes to show us that time and space are

connected. The psychological pathways of Jack's mind literally become a labyrinth by the film's end, in which he becomes hopelessly lost.

The Hotel itself is also a maze, cosmic or otherwise – the Steadicam's lengthy, fluid negotiations of its corridors serve not to map the layout of the Hotel but to disorient us. Even Wendy, when first entering the Hotel, remarks that she will have to leave a trail of breadcrumbs to find her way around, a la Hansel and Gretel (another story which features a father instructed to kill his children with an ax). In short, the Hotel is unfixed in space and time (the intertitles that announce the days, date and time don't do anything to make the experience more concrete for us). The past and the present are an overlapping confusion, muddied further by Danny's precognitive flashes into the future. The Hotel itself cannot be discounted as a major character of *The Shining*. Even though it may be unfixed it can still occupy what Jung called an objective psyche, a place where biology and psychology might mingle with and influence each other. The Hotel is a living entity (blood gushes from its elevators like burst arteries), thinking, imagining, creating images of humans to act out endless games for its amusement (the 1927 photograph at the end of the film would suggest as much). The forces of creation and destruction are in constant conflict. Small wonder that Jack, as a character in this staged entertainment, is unable to write a novel himself.

I'm impressed with *The Shining* and always look forward to repeat screenings that give me the chance to re-evaluate my prior discoveries about the film and make new ones. The beauty of Kubrick's film is that despite its many layers it can still be enjoyed at the most basic level of a simple horror yarn. But don't be surprised if something sneaks into your subconscious and stays with you for some time afterwards. It may have even happened to Stephen King.

SIDDHARTHA (1973) 86m. This adaptation of Herman Hesse's novel was obviously a personal project for producer-director-screenwriter Conrad Rook. Those who have embraced the book should be relieved that it was placed in good hands. Its simple tale recounts the life of Siddhartha, a young Brahmin who leaves his village to become a sadhu (a wandering holy man who lives on the charity of others) in order to achieve enlightenment. This story appeals because it brings large philosophical ideas down to a basic human level that we are able to relate to. Siddhartha's journey takes him from Brahmin to ascetic to lover to laborer to father. He undergoes a spiritual rebirth with each new step, until he becomes his own teacher. What is most interesting about this film is that we never feel in any position to judge Siddhartha as he shifts from one lifestyle to another – we simply accept it as part of a learning curve he must put himself through. This, of course, is what Hesse is propounding all along. But there is certainly no cause for us to feel smug: Siddhartha voices his thoughts and revelations so eloquently that we are always respectful of him (I particularly like his speech at the end of the film about the stone). Even though the characters sum up enlightenment in a few words ("Everything returns"; "I can think, I can wait, I can fast"), it doesn't come across as axiomatic or trite: these simple expressions reassure us that such discoveries are not exclusive to holy men.

Rook uses images (gorgeously photographed by Sven Nykvist in Northern India) and music to bring the book to life without sacrificing any of its gentleness. The dialogue, as spoken by Shashi Kapoor (as Siddhartha) and his companions, has a gentle rhythm of its own. Even the name 'Siddhartha' alone is pronounced with a relaxing, peaceful lilt. It's almost as if Rook knows just how far to go before making his audience nod off into sleep. Hesse's slim novel translates to the screen more comfortably than his other voyage-of-discovery story *Steppenwolf*.

SIMON (1980) 97m. Along with *Altered States*, this uneven comedy by Marshall Brickman seemed to make 1980 the year for isolation tank movies. Alan Arkin plays the title character, a college lecturer who has been selected for an elaborate, if somewhat fey, experiment by Austin Pendleton's elite scientific task force. Through various none-too-subtle methods (it's a comedy, after all), Arkin is duped into believing that he is not a human being, but, in fact, an extra-terrestrial. Once this plot turn takes effect, the direction of the story is anyone's guess. It's obvious that writer-director Brickman wanted to milk as many ideas from this

premise as he could. Instead, the satire becomes muddy. Part of the problem is that Brickman keeps shifting targets – religion, television, the government – and doesn't provide a cruel enough edge to his story. Its light tone is reminiscent of the earlier Woody Allen movies (particularly *Sleeper*) that Brickman had a hand in. Arkin, a fine actor who has demonstrated his comedic touch in many other roles, is stuck with an impossibly confused character. In the end, Simon becomes little more than a melange of Arkin's more familiar mannerisms.

Despite flaws, *Simon* still manages many funny moments – a highlight is Arkin's mime of the evolution of man, excitedly narrated by observing scientist Wallace Shawn. Shawn and his colleagues (particularly Max Wright, whose role fits him like a glove) provide much humor as the cabal of geniuses that conspiracy theorists love to think are secretly running the world. These scientists, however, are not interested in major issues – their pursuits are petty or fanciful. The newly 'alienated' Simon, in like fashion, is interested only in the trivial aspects of modern life. Intentionally or not, this keeps the whole story inconsequential. Yet although Simon has none of the disorientation we would accord any extra-terrestrial visitor, he does draw attention to one element we might otherwise overlook: if aliens did appear on our planet, their culture shock would not be generated by such global concepts as politics, religion, or war, but rather the petty accessories of people's everyday lives. The film's uninspiring title didn't contribute much to its box-office. Also with: Madeline Kahn (less kooky than usual), and Judy Graubert as Simon's girlfriend.

SITA SINGS THE BLUES (2008) 78m. Some stories have been around so long that they're never going to stop being told. China's 'Journey to the West', for example, has taken on a life far beyond its original narrative and is now more widely recognised as a TV series or movie than a text. As far as epics go, Ancient Greece had the Iliad, Mesopotamia had Gilgamesh, and India had Ramayana, a Sanskrit tale I was unaware of until viewing the animated feature *Sita Sings the Blues*. Writer-director-editor-everything Nina Paley distils the saga into a tidy 80 minutes, telling the story through gramophone recordings (by jazz vocalist Annette Hanshaw) interspersed with a hilarious improvised narration by a trio of shadow puppets. She even has time to throw in a parallel storyline that takes place in contemporary New York. The notable accomplishment of *Sita* is Paley's adept maneuvering of disparate elements (animation, Indian folk mythology,1920s blues) and different graphic styles (there are three different versions of Sita alone – narrated Sita, singing Sita, and talking Sita) into an engaging tale that never seems forced or rushed.

Cinema purists may sniff at *Sita*'s antiseptically smooth patina of flash animation, but animation has never been the domain of hand-painted cels alone, as pixilation, stop-motion, claymation, and CGI have all proven. In fact, the bright colours and clear-line technique of flash animation are highly appropriate for the presentation of the storybook illustrations that guide us through the movie. Paley's film, which on first description sounds too cluttered for its own good, avoids becoming pretentious or 'artistic' through a lively sense of humour that vies with the graphic design and Hanshaw's performances as *Sita*'s main asset. Having three narrators casually discuss the plot is a masterstroke, making the synopsis of Ramayana feel like storytelling instead of a lecture (surely the way Paley first learned of the tale herself as a youngster) and preserving the tradition of oral history which passed along such stories centuries ago. *Sita*'s agenda is clear from the outset that it wants to entertain first, inform second.

The modern-day episodes could easily be jettisoned from the story, although as one of the protagonists, named Nina, is voiced by Paley herself, one suspects that there might be something autobiographical inspiring their inclusion. *Sita* takes the time-honored tradition of Bollywood pop movies, in which musical numbers slot into the story regardless of genre, and switches their eastern rhythms for vintage western jazz. It shouldn't work, but it does. As Sita's tale is one of continual suffering and hardship, the most logical choice for musical accompaniment is blues. Unfortunately it is this innovation which became a sticking point for the film, freezing its distribution due to the heavy licensing fees demanded by the copyright holders of the original 1927-1929 recordings. However, such muzzling is irrelevant in

the days of cyberspace file sharing, and such is the wit and charm of *Sita* that it will be widely seen regardless of restrictions – or even because of them. Some stories have been around so long that they're never going to stop being told. Especially in the age of the internet.

SLEEPY HOLLOW (1999) 111m. Did you ever see that short Disney cartoon when you were a kid, the one about the Headless Horseman? Do you remember the wild finale, a mixture of scary slapstick, which had Ichabod Crane galloping for dear life towards the bridge that marked that essential piece of childhood myth, the Line Of Safety. Tim Burton remembered, and I find it perfectly suitable that the former (though briefly-tenured) Disney animator should produce a live-action elaboration of that short piece. Here's another gem from the Burton repertoire, and one which few others would have attempted at the turn of the millennium: a good old-fashioned horror film.

Set firmly in the 18th century and occupying a universe all of its own (although strongly derived from the Hammer films of the late 60s and early 70s), *Sleepy Hollow* succeeds because it refuses the self-deprecating concessions film-makers almost seem obliged to put in their films nowadays. No one-liners. No provision for a sequel. Its only nudge to the audience is a well-timed millennium reference (and, intentionally or not, a couple of images from *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*, the visages of Jack Skellington and Large Marge respectively) and state-of-the-art FX notwithstanding, the end result could pass muster as some sort of lost classic unearthed in the Hammer Studio vaults – it even has that distinct indigo hue and those washed-out faces. This movie is so out-of-era that it's simply wonderful: not exactly a homage, not even a revision – it's just a crackling good Gothic Yarn. New York constable Ichabod Crane (Johnny Depp), is sent to the small agrarian township of Sleepy Hollow to investigate a recent spate of decapitation murders. The townsfolk blame a local legend, which Depp airily dismisses – at first. A first-hand encounter with the Horseman quickly turns him into a believer. Depp's transition from rational scientific enquiry to supernatural and arcane lore works seamlessly into the story: it doesn't seem wrong to us that he should 'switch sides' so easily, integrating a little of both into his investigation. The seeds have already been planted, after all, in the skewed flashbacks to his childhood (although that haunted child reminded me more of a young Burton than a young Depp), so the appearance of Crane as a well-attired adult investigator poking around crime scenes in gloomy forests is no more peculiar to us than it would be if we were watching an episode of a protean *X-Files*.

The concerns of the plot are duly interspersed with Horror intrusions (and how Burton loves to see those severed heads roll!) but by the time of its finale *Sleepy Hollow* has let slip its full melodramatic glory. The usual lightning flashes and explosions of shattering glass easily become the type of genre standards that are included only because they're expected, but by the time you have sat through ninety minutes of *Sleepy Hollow*, the clichés are no longer clichés. Every swirling mass of leaves and gout of blood conspires to produce a cinematic, gothic opera: the Headless Horseman is brutal and frightening; the sky is perpetually grey or stormy; the trees are black and twisted; everything outside is muted with dampness; the scenes of the countryside, the feasts, the cornshocks, the windmills and the kitchens are reminiscent of Dutch and Flemish masters; similarly the striking faces of the cast could also have been lifted from portraits (although I wish Christina Ricci had been left with her raven tresses instead of those blonde curls), indicating that Burton's visual sense of the film was inspired by paintings. Irrespective of its reference points, *Sleepy Hollow* is its own entity. But if it's "supposed" to be a Hammer film, a recreation of 17th-century art, or post-Disney trauma, then I'll vote for the last on that list – if only to tantalize myself with the possibility that Burton might have something to say about the shooting of Old Yeller or the death of Bambi's mom in his future projects.

SMILE (1975) 117m. One of Michael Ritchie's better films: a California town holds the state finals for the Young American Miss beauty pageant, and we are placed in the position of judges – not of the contestants but of the pageant itself. Since ridiculing beauty contests is about as easy as shooting fish in a

barrel, you'd be right to expect *Smile* to be an all-out comedy. It is funny (the kind of film that immediately attracts the phrase 'wickedly funny') but smart enough to keep its satire played relatively straight. The pageant itself is low-key enough to be believable within the budget/facilities of the host town (Ritchie actually charged real audiences to watch the fake contest!) – there's no need for high-stakes glitz-and-glamor when we can see the same sort of facade exposed much more humbly and just as relevantly. This approach also has the benefit of helping us sympathize with the contestants, who for the most part are a pretty down-to-earth and amiable group of girls.

The contestants' interviews, rehearsals and performances are the main thrust of *Smile*'s satire, but Ritchie and screenwriter Jerry Belson see a reflection in the small town itself. I don't know who came up with the idea of casting Bruce Dern and Barbara Feldon as the pageant organizers but it was either a happy accident or just plain inspired. What better role to exploit Dern's disarming grin and snake-oil voice than that of a car salesman? And what better part for a car salesman to play than a beauty pageant judge – after all, the merchandise is similarly labeled, polished up, and displayed on stage to the accompaniment of smooth-talking patter. The connection between the contest and Dern himself is summed up when one of his friends mockingly accuses him of being just another Young American Miss. I think it's more likely that Dern has become the pageant personified, a blatant symbol of all that is artificial. It's impossible to tell when he's being sincere, even though he remains consistently loyal to the idea of the contest (when he utters down-home phrases like "holy heck" at points of exasperation, it seems to be the huckster in him still talking). At the conclusion of the contest he sits alone at the judges' table, evaluating a lifestyle of dressing up for his lodge brothers, performing absurd rituals (even sillier than the pageant), selling used vehicles and judging contests ("Gold this year!" he says approvingly when he sees his new official's badge). It comes as a nice moment when he finally drops his guard, loses his ever-present smile, and attempts to strike up a real conversation – but then discovers that he can't be a 'real' person in his small-town world.

Smile's matter-of-fact approach works well in its favor. We might laugh at some of the cobbled-together items in the talent contest, but it's plain that these girls are only doing what they are best at, no matter what it turns out to be. Despite the number of contestants, and their limited screen time, everyone seems to be a well-realized character (as opposed to the more satirical standards of caricature). Familiar names in the lineup include Annette O'Toole, Melanie Griffith and Colleen Camp. Charlie Chaplin's song 'Smile' is used effectively to open and close the film. You have to wonder if Belson and Ritchie set the beauty contest in California just so they could get the Beach Boys' 'California Girls' on the soundtrack.

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES (1983) 100m. A failure or a success, depending on how you look at it: upon my first viewing, I opted for the former, upon the second I became more charitable. The problem, as apparent within its opening moments, is the marriage of the word WICKED with WALT DISNEY, which is not too promising a combination. First indications of *Something Wicked* were hopeful, with Ray Bradbury writing the screenplay adaptation of his own novel, and Jack Clayton brought on board to direct (with Bradbury's approval). A few years earlier Disney might have gotten away with it, but when the early 80s saw a revitalization of horror movies, and special effects were now the expected hook for big-budget films, *Wicked* didn't hold up. In the first place, its particular tone of horror was not in the same excesses of its contemporaries, and secondly, many of the animation effects sequences looked stale, added afterwards by nervous execs who could see the likes of Spielberg out-Disneying the studio at its own game.

Bradbury has never been the easiest writer to adapt to the screen – he wrote few novels in favor of short stories, and his lyrical style is better suited to the printed word than the filmed image (as uneven films like *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Illustrated Man* demonstrate). *Wicked* draws upon two aspects prevalent throughout Bradbury's work: nostalgia and dread. In the case of the first, the small-town atmosphere is lovingly brought to life in the film's

opening scenes and there's certainly no fault to be found with its widescreen visuals. Dread, however, is trickier to pull off, especially for audiences expecting their horror to be more of the seat-jumping variety. Since the Disney logo robs the film of any threat that would crank up the tension for horror fans, *Wicked* needs to be viewed as a different kind of film. In some ways, its almost a subversion of Disney norms – there's a visiting carnival, two young boys given the run of the town (Shawn Carson and Vidal Peterson), and a homey setting populated with slightly dotty inhabitants on first-name terms – it's the type of place where we'd expect to see Toby Tyler or Pollyanna ambling around the corner. Plucky though these and other previous Disney tykes may be, they would be over their heads in the town that Bradbury gives them – the villains are not the usual jewel thieves, smugglers or bank robbers, but supernatural figures that prey on human misery by building up hopes and then shattering them, leaving their victims as lifeless husks.

Jonathan Pryce cuts a fine figure as Mr Dark, the owner of the visiting carnival, resisting the urge to play the role too theatrically (even though, as a carnival operator, he has the licence to huckster things up). In the film's best scene, he confronts Jason Robards, the ageing father of one of the boys, and rips pages out of a book as if they were potentially regained years being torn from his life. It's a welcome confrontation as it's one of the few times we see adult characters (i.e. experienced actors) playing against each other. Carson and Peterson hold their own by doing everything they're supposed to, reacting every way they should, and delivering Bradbury's dialogue without making it seem forced (it's probably second nature to Carson as he had already been spooked by a dark carnival in Tobe Hooper's horror flick *The Funhouse*). Still, perhaps they're a little too innocent, inheriting the Disney tradition, or curse, of all juveniles, and consequently incapable of recognizing real evil. They observe the grotesquery of the carnival with incomprehension, its backwards-spinning carousel with wonder, and in one scene, the bare midriffs of belly dancers with something a little more than boyish curiosity. Perhaps feeling that kids couldn't really be afraid of intangible horrors, the studio added a sequence where the boys are "attacked" by troops of spiders. Not surprisingly, it's the worst scene in the film. However, if Bradbury's novel had been made by any studio other than Disney, there undoubtedly would have been many such conventional 'fright' scenes. As it turns out, the rigors of the studio may have provided the film with the right amount of subtlety to make it more faithful to Bradbury, if not to horror fans of the 80s.

SOMEWHERE IN TIME (1980) 103m. I wasn't too enthusiastic about this change of pace from writer Richard Matheson after a diet of his sharp sci-fi and horror tales, but later viewings have softened my views. His terribly romantic story of two star-crossed lovers goes one up on the Bard by separating them not by distance or walls, but by time. What do you do when your lover lives 68 years in the past? That's what we find out when young Chicago playwright Richard Collier (Christopher Reeve), like Dana Andrews in *Laura*, falls in love with the alluring Elise McKenna (Jane Seymour) after seeing her portrait. The most daring stroke of the film (and novel) is to make the time travel aspect completely non-scientific: Reeve simply wills himself back to 1912. It sounds laughable, but suits the mood of the film perfectly – I believe the reason why *Somewhere in TIme* has attracted its devoted following is not because of the Reeve/Seymour romance itself but that it so assuredly affirms that love is a force to which the laws of the universe cannot apply. Who wouldn't want to do what Reeve does, to create simultaneity of time that in effect becomes a kind of eternal youth, without the prerequisite impenetrable science?

Somewhere in Time's premise, lead characters, and magnificent backdrop (the Grand Hotel of Michigan's Mackinac Island) has made it popular with romantics, but personally I find Reeve's efforts to investigate and reach Seymour's past more involving than his arrival. It's the nature of fantasy to make the fantasizing the best part of the journey – when it's actualized it is over. That's why I would have liked to see Reeve exploring his new, exciting environment for a while instead of heading straight for Seymour's door. However, the screenplay doesn't give him much of a choice – the compressed

timeframe of the story (and running time of the movie) means that the two protagonists don't have long to spend together and fall in love. It doesn't really stretch their credibility – the time travel element has already planted the idea of 'destiny' in our minds for us to accept Richard and Elise as a couple. Their final separation scene is startling and, coming when it does, highly effective. Other scenes are more obviously manipulative but still work: Elise squealing "Richard!" upon sighting him from the distance; Richard giving Elise just the right kind of smile for her portrait; and, in a highlight, Elise slipping out of character onstage to ruminate about the man she loves.

The film's ending is a little sappy but points the way directly to Matheson's following work, the life-after-death fantasy 'What Dreams May Come'. Matheson himself has a walk-on when Reeve passes him outside the hotel. Obviously the best way to see this film is at the Grand Hotel itself, where *Somewhere in Time* weekends have become an annual event for the film's huge fan base. In-joke: Reeve reads a book entitled 'Travels Through Time', authored by Dr Finney – a reference to fantasy writer Jack Finney, author of a number of time travel stories and novels.

SOUTH PARK: BIGGER, LONGER, AND UNCUT (1999) 80m. Those who like to collect *South Park* sound bites for their web pages will have their work cut out for them here. Watch this with a group of fans and you'll know what I mean – nearly every line gets a response. It's a rare thing for an animated feature to be more dependent on the script than the animation itself, but that's pretty much the case here. *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* is the feature version of the hit cable TV series, and was really quite groundbreaking as far as animated features went in that it managed to attract the attention of mainstream box office with scrappy, alternative material. Whether it ever screens on television in any form is another matter completely – this is the worst of the TV show's regular offenses taken to the nth degree. Its two most puerile and irritating characters (a flatulent duo named Terrance and Philip) are the catalyst for the plot, which involves the South Park Elementary School kids sneaking into an R-rated movie and emerging with their vocabulary expanded considerably. The mothers of the children – this is trash imitating life, folks – immediately ask for reprisals to be taken against the film. Of course these are the charges that creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone had been answering since their cartoon first became a hit, and this is their magnificently infantile response. I won't get into any polemic about how *South Park* is setting a bad example for children, because as long as there have been cartoons there have always been sad individuals unable to grasp the concept of animation being an adult entertainment form, and the argument is pointless before it has even begun. Nuff said.

South Park is a riot (one line about menstruation kept me laughing for over a minute) but, as is usually the case, its humor is an acquired taste and it does help if you are familiar with the characters. The pretext for getting all the children suddenly swearing is a logical one, given the absence of R-rated language in the early stages of the television series (even though we all knew they were capable of it). For the first half hour it's funny, but then too much weight is placed on this one idea as the film's central gag. As is often the case with this sort of thing, the initial shock/humor of seeing the grade-schoolers using coarse language becomes routine with overuse. It wouldn't have been self-censoring of Parker and Stone to have edited quite a bit of the 'R' language out, especially in the film's second half because there would have been enough concessions included for series followers to compensate: Kenny's weekly death scene goes beyond the show's standard cut-out animation style into a fluid, three-dimensional afterlife; Cartman gets a reprise of his well-known pejorative ditty about Kyle's mother; there's some truly appalling and tasteless attacks on Saddam Hussein (but he deserves it, the jerk); and one unexpected semi-serious moment involving Kenny near the film's conclusion (which includes a line spoken by *Beavis and Butt-Head* creator Mike Judge). And then of course there are the songs. As tiresome as these may seem in the Disney films and their imitators (which always slow the plot down with some sappy number in the hopes of netting an Oscar), in *South Park* they are suitably short, funny and punchy, including a *Les Miserables* spoof and a zinger directed at soul-searching ballad-monologues

(featuring Satan). Surprisingly the songs are pretty good (my favorites would be the opening track and 'It's Easy, MMMkay'), and one, 'Blame Canada' earned an Oscar nomination. As usual, the Academy picked the most routine of the tunes – who among us wouldn't have loved to see the Terrance and Philip number performed at the Awards ceremony instead?

SOYLENT GREEN (1973) 97m. In *The Omega Man*, Charlton Heston played the last human on Earth, wandering an empty city alone. Two years later he'd have exactly the opposite problem – fighting for room in a city of 40 million. The year is 2022, and Heston is Detective Thorn, a New York cop investigating the murder of a director of the Soylent Corporation, a powerful food processing company responsible for the manufacture of vegetable concentrate biscuits. Thorn is impressed by the wealth of the victim (in this future, "rich" means being able to afford running water and strawberries), which enables comforts that he and his roommate Sol (Edward G. Robinson) can only dream of.

In such an overpopulated world, it's only to be expected that life is cheap. People crowd like refugees, living from hand to mouth; attractive young women are rented out with apartments and referred to as 'furniture'. *Soylent Green* is relentlessly downbeat; the future is not only crowded but also polluted (everything outdoors is filmed through a green haze), economically repressed, nearly bereft of all natural resources, and suffering from the Greenhouse effect. Director Richard Fleischer doesn't show us huge mob scenes (apart from one riot sequence) or grand views of an out-of-control, decaying megalopolis, but instead gives us the sense of such a future by focusing on elements of daily life that have irrevocably changed as a consequence. Robinson's Sol, who is pointedly the 'soul' of the film, is our emotional and philosophical connection to the unspoiled past – his memories are supposed to be ours – and provides the film's only touching moments. It's a rare film that makes death (by euthanasia) a pleasant and more preferable alternative than living, but in *Soylent Green* humanity has reached a dead end: it posits that at a certain level, there are no solutions. In fact, the revelation at the film's end (which you'll probably guess beforehand if you haven't already heard), if reappraised, may not be the act of evil and exploitation you'll first think, but the only viable plan left for survival – it will make you wonder about the lengths humanity will go to in order to remain on the planet, and whether it is even necessary if the more noble of human qualities are to be forfeited as a result.

Soylent Green works when it operates at a shabby, grass-roots level (it was a mistake to try to pass off a 1970s video game as 21st century technology!) and makes the interesting, if depressing, point that squalor never dates. Harry Harrison wrote the source novel, *Make Room! Make Room!*, and was critical of the film production. Robinson died soon after it was released (adding poignancy to his death scene). At least he left us with a solid, resonant performance.

SPEED RACER (2008) 135m. After the phenomenal success of their *Matrix* films, the Wachowski brothers kept audiences wondering about their next project with much anticipation, and surprised everyone when it turned out to be an adaptation of the 1960s Japanese cartoon *Speed Racer*. It seemed a safe enough risk – the Wachowskis had built up a solid fanbase, and as one of Japan's first anime exports *Speed* had been playing abroad for forty years – but the movie ran out of gas at the box office when audiences proved far less interested in seeing it than other 2008 blockbusters, which stuck to their genres much more straightforwardly.

With *Speed Racer* the Wachowskis blur the definition of "children's film" as much as the original cartoon challenged Western perceptions of "children's television". The cartoon series alarmed me as a kid – it was not only the first time I'd seen cartoon characters sweat (in frantic flying bullets of perspiration), but also *die*. It defied all logic that a cartoon character could be killed since it wasn't alive in the first place, but in this show there was always the frightening possibility that we would see somebody permanently wipe themselves out in a car crash (the movie is a little more generous, cocooning racers in protective gel as soon as their cars disintegrate around them). To maintain the atmosphere of a family film, nobody dies in the

movie and there are many child-friendly capers courtesy of youngster Spritle (does anyone else think the kid playing him looks like a junior Al 'Grandpa Munster' Lewis?). As befitting his animated origins, Spritle is a strictly two-dimensional, a caricature of a kid rather than a real child, obsessed with candy, TV, and getting into mischief with his pet chimp. To take stock for a moment: The Wachowskis….and a pet chimp? No wonder viewers' heads were spinning as fast as the wheels on Speed's Mach 5. As a counterbalance, the adult characters seem unaware that they're living in a cartoon and are preoccupied with issues of loyalty, justice, and loss, reflecting the weird level of intensity of the TV series.

Speed is filled with virtuoso racing visuals that move faster and more furiously than anything else previously handled by conventional CGI, even though, as anything is possible in CGI, it can hardly be bound by convention. Flying in the face of cinema's FX quest to make CGI as realistic as possible, the Wachowskis applied their technological innovations to showcase deliberately fake-looking images which looked like toy cars driving through a video game. *Speed* is splashed with more colors than it seems possible for the human retina to absorb. It's a high-octane celebration of all that is cartoony – as a boy, Speed creates simple flick animation with his notebook and pencil; he surrounds himself with a world of crudely drawn cel-animation; his younger cousin Spritle jumps into his favorite superhero anime; and the racers roar past a wall of Muybridge's pioneering animated images of galloping horses (remodelled as zebras to make the effect even more stroboscopic). That the cars travel along tracks right out of a Hot Wheels catalogue tips us off early on that the Wachowskis are not only fleshing out the imaginary universe we inhabited while playing with toys as children, but also creating a whole alternate reality – or, in light of their previous *Matrix* milieu, an alternate alternate reality. In *Speed Racer*, the same laws of physics are defied as openly as in their earlier SF work, although this time cars are performing the acrobatics and not lots of cool guys in black coats and sunglasses. The sequences where racecars dodge, dive, and flip themselves into the air as if picked up by giant hands of children makes for a big-screen ride as wild as the rollercoaster that thrilled 1950s audiences in *This is Cinerama*. Fifty years later, and in another century, *Speed Racer* might well be subtitled *This is CGI*.

SPICE WORLD (1997) 89m. *Spice World* is like a jigsaw puzzle in reverse: you start with the completed picture and then dismantle it piece by piece, revealing how the whole thing was locked together to begin with. It's an obvious metaphor for film criticism, but with a textbook example such as this, there is very little beyond the obvious. The same processes for its criticism are responsible for its creation; you can almost hear the production meetings behind every scene.

For a brief period near the end of the 90s, the five-girl pop group Spice Girls saw a meteoric rise to fame and fortune – would that shooting star have turned out to have been more akin to Halley's instead of the Shoemaker-Levy they might have lasted longer before plunging back down into the atmosphere just as suddenly – garnering legions of young fans and saturating the mass media with their visages and, occasionally, music. As with any other product, the group was marketed with a slogan, 'Girl Power' and the Girls themselves were similarly packaged with the epithets Sporty, Scary, Ginger (who did even more in the name of promoting Union Jack clothing than Tim Brooke-Taylor from *The Goodies*), Baby and Posh. It's the same strategy that worked with the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers (substitute monikers for colors), and is aimed at pretty much the same age range, so why not? It was only a matter of time when a Spice Girls movie was going to arrive on the scene, and just as inevitable that it would open itself up to criticism from those who were fast wearying of the group. Using the tried and true template of the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night*, *Spice World* follows the misadventures of the five Spices and their harried manager as they prepare for a big show.

Having established a pretty basic formula, the next decision of the film-makers was to ward off the expected criticism of the girls' images and the likely transience of their fame by getting their own scripted potshots in first. The overall tone of the piece isn't self-deprecating enough to pull this off, although ironically the predictions of girls leaving the group, falling pregnant and failing to maintain the heights of

their chart success did come true within a couple of years of the film's release. Instead we are left with the rather curious sight of the 'real' Spice Girls playing the characters of the Spice Girls who are trying to break out of their media conceptions and into the 'real' Spice Girls. In the long term, we're left with no more insight in their feature than one of their music videos, and those who have never seen the five performers before will be hard pressed to see what the fuss was about or even to differentiate them. As far as the film is concerned, one is a bit more 'working class' than the others, one rolls her eyes a lot, one sucks a lollipop, one seems sulkily detached, and one has ginger hair. If you need to learn more, tune into the wonderful music trivia show *Pop-Up Video*.

Spice World is so dedicated to distracting attention from itself that it fabricates an abundance of subplots and throws in a huge number of cameos – the old tactic of endorsing a celebrity product by surrounding it with those who already have credibility (Jonathan Ross, Elvis Costello, Jools Holland and others). The camera is almost afraid to linger on any one member of the group, so the dialogue becomes a string of one-liners. Meanwhile, dance routines and songs drift in and out of the story, the Girls jump from one unrelated scene to the next and for a finale the film starts spoofing its own status as a vehicle for the group. By its very nature *Spice World* is consumed quickly and then forgotten. It's not a bad film (has anybody ever tried to watch that Pet Shop Boys movie more than once?), it's just that it was never possible for it to be particularly good.

As *Spice World* is primarily an exercise in promotion it would make criticism on cinematic grounds redundant (doubly so when you consider that its target audience of youngsters would not be the type to even read reviews) unless the purpose of the act was to be seen as providing a record of a cultural phenomenon. Will the 12-year old girls who saw this movie in 1997 be reading the reviews out of interest or nostalgia many years later? It looks as though even the Spice Girls read their demographic wrong: as the film's credits roll, Mel B stares into the camera lens and says decisively to the other members of the group that the audience is about to leave the cinema and go to the pub. Hardly.

SPIDER (2002) 98m. You may be haunted by David Cronenberg's intensive adaptation of Patrick McGrath's novel, written for the screen by McGrath himself. Certainly that's the state that 'Spider' Cleg (Ralph Fiennes) is in from start to finish. Forget other emotive dramatizations of schizophrenia, paranoia, and mental illness that you might have seen on screen previously: this is one of the closest verisimilitudes of insanity you're likely to see. There are no lurid hallucinations or sequences that pretend to be real and then suddenly reveal themselves as imaginary, no element of conspiracy or a struggle between the institution and the institutionalized, and no jumping from the mind of the psychotic to the real world. To a hardened case of paranoid schizophrenia everything is real, and that is the thrust of *Spider*. It is a film that can be viewed a second time with a different perspective, without having the feeling of being 'cheated' the first time around.

As Spider, Fiennes plays the most shattered character I think I've ever seen in a film. He is barely intelligible, moving as if breaking under an invisible weight. Everything is a labor to him. The only thing he appears to do easily is assemble jigsaw puzzles, which become an externalization of his elusive, broken past. At first glance it doesn't seem likely that there's going to be any closure for Fiennes' character, but there's an indefatigable element to Spider which keeps him weaving impenetrable but purposeful patterns. Our first glimpse of him as a child is when he is making a cat's cradle ("Aren't you clever," his mother remarks), a setup for a series of flashbacks that will follow. By storytelling conventions these should show us what happened in Cleg's childhood to send him on the road to madness, but in *Spider* they cannot be taken at face value (it's even more confusing in the novel). At the end we have to accept the uncomfortable possibility that children do not become insane because of any conveniently-timed trauma, but that they are already insane without anyone knowing. There's a neat collision of different motifs in the film when an asylum director places the last, bloodstained shard of glass into a reassembled window pane, in effect setting an implement of murder/suicide into a jigsaw that resembles a spiderweb. It foreshadows the film's

revelation – yes, there is one – when Spider brandishes a murder weapon, recalling a deadly web he once wove, and sees the last piece of the puzzle fall in place.

As with other Cronenberg films, *Spider* will not draw a mass audience. Those who are mesmerized will be matched in number with those who tire of it halfway through. Our attention depends on Fienne's unique performance, and he is ably supported by Gabriel Byrne and Miranda Richardson (Cleg's parents) and particularly the Dickensian boarding house supervisor played by Lynn Redgrave. With not one special effect to be seen, this is an actor's picture that is yet another new path for Cronenberg. Don't expect to see his trademark mutations this time around: as the director's pictures go, *Spider* is certainly light years removed from *The Fly*.

STANLEY KUBRICK: A LIFE IN PICTURES (2001) 142m. It was a shame that we had to wait for one of the cinema's greatest directors to die before we got this overview of his career, especially since this documentary reveals that Kubrick had intended to give some interviews to 'set the record straight' after completion of his last film, *Eyes Wide Shut*. Nevertheless, there should be enough in its two and a half hours to satisfy most movie buffs. As it's directed by Kubrick's brother-in-law Jan Harlan, and features interviews with his sister, daughters and widow Christiane, it's reasonable to expect a personal account of Kubrick 'the man'. Instead, the film sticks to its title and presents a chronology of his movies, revealing incidental information about Kubrick along the way. It adds up to a great homage – as well as a generous selection of clips (including his debut documentary *Day of the Fight*), we are treated to rare home movies, behind-the-scenes footage and a huge cast list of famous faces talking about their association with the director. The expected film-makers make appearances – Spielberg, Mazursky (who starred in *Fear and Desire*), and Scorsese (reiterating views about *Barry Lyndon* from his presentation *A Personal Journey Through American Movies*) – alongside a few odd choices like Woody Allen and Alex Cox. There's also a surprising contribution from composer Gyorgy Ligeti. Sadly, many of the star players of Kubrick's earlier films are no longer with us, leaving Peter Ustinov (*Spartacus*) as the sole representative of the old guard. It's hard not to be satisfied with the lineup that *A Life in Pictures* presents but it would have been interesting to have heard the impressions of Sue Lyon and Danny Lloyd, the only two actors to work with Kubrick as youngsters.

As the chronology progresses the amount of screen time spent on the films increases – in effect because Kubrick's work is becoming more ambitious and there are more interview subjects at hand. There is even time spent on films that Kubrick didn't get to make: *Napoleon* was pulled from production after the poor box-office showings of a rival film on the same subject, *Aryan Papers* was pre-empted and defused a little by *Schindler's List*, and *A.I.* was eventually handed over to Spielberg after years of development. It's as near-complete a filmography (and non-filmography) as you could hope for, although Kubrick's ill-fated association with Marlon Brando's western *One-Eyed Jacks* is noticeably absent. It's interesting to see not only the processes and rationale involved in making each film, but also the public and critical reaction afterwards. As the documentary points out, Kubrick became his own worst enemy by having to follow up each successive film with something even better. By the time of *Barry Lyndon* and *The Shining*, expectations were crushing the productions well before their premieres. It was impossible for Kubrick to be innovative for every new film (which may explain the increasing gaps between each new project) but *A Life in Pictures* also reminds us that his work nevertheless remained unique, copying from no other cinema product before it; even a practise as basic as the use of established music can be traced back to his incorporation of Vera Lynn in *Dr Strangelove* and Strauss in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

A Life in Pictures opens with a barrage of newspaper clippings that label Kubrick as obsessive and reclusive. By the film's end there would seem little evidence that would suggest otherwise, although Harlan manages to create a connection to the warmer side of Kubrick's personality by keeping the documentary's tone engaging (the film clips also provide much of its humor). Many anecdotes from Kubrick's family and friends are funny because of

the popular image of the director as a perfectionist or control freak (e.g. one of his daughters produces a set of instructions about the family pets that is meticulous to say the least). The home movies of Kubrick goofing around for the camera as a child (in 1940!) are priceless – it comes full circle when we see him filming his own children. Fittingly, it's Christiane, who he fell in love with while directing her in *Paths of Glory*, who gets the film's great final line. *A Life in Pictures* is more than an homage; it's also a gift.

STEREO (1969) / CRIMES OF THE FUTURE (1970) 65m each. David Cronenberg once had ambitions to be an "obscure science fiction novelist" prior to his film-making career, and it shows through in these two trial works, which are so similar to each other and yet so distinct from his other films that they cannot help but be discussed together. They are not recommended as general viewing but should be of interest to Cronenberg completists in that they establish the themes of sexuality, mutation and medicine prevalent in most of his subsequent work.

Cronenberg's debut *Stereo* is the result of his interest in underground film – it may aspire to be experimental but comes across more like a student project. There is no live sound, but a voice-over spoken by different narrators who sound as if they are taking turns reading from the same medical journal. The storyline – if it can be called that – describes an experiment by a research facility in Ontario to accelerate telepathic abilities among a group of young subjects. As a kind of punchline, the film ends inconclusively, with the narration stating that all the events we have seen in the film are in need of yet further analysis.

It's hard to say whether *Stereo* succeeds or fails without knowing Cronenberg's real intent – as a stand-alone experimental film it's no better or worse than many other student features, but if its aim is to portray a fictitious medical report in a documentary style, then it does so suitably. All of this is to the expense of involvement, however. The bloodless delivery of unending pseudoscience makes this difficult viewing, although there are some intriguing nuggets buried within (Cronenberg's wry take on heterosexuality, for example). In fact, *Stereo* rejects the notion of film as a medium of communication and sets out, almost as a put-on, to alienate its viewers instead: Cronenberg is more interested in framing his 'actors' within chic, modernist buildings than providing his visuals with any human impetus; the lengthy silent passages give us a rest from the unwieldy narration but do not serve to clarify what anyone in the film is feeling; and the only real 'action' sequence, in which someone is chased through a building, is no more than a psychic projection. I don't think this is misjudgment on Cronenberg's part. By crafting his film in a subconscious, elusive manner, he may have hoped to simulate the subject of his story – because we see no characters speak and understand only fragments of what we hear in between the silences, it may be that *Stereo* tries to be a conduit to its own telepathic essaying.

Stereo has much in common with its nominal companion piece, *Crimes of the Future*. They have identical running times, the same cast, and share the same filming approach (silent with voice-overs added) and visual sense (people continuously framed against architecture). The narration of the latter is a little less technical, but just as oblique and delivered even more soporifically. It is these similarities that make it hard to separate the two beyond the most technically apparent features – that is, *Crimes* is in color and its soundtrack is punctuated by intrusively dubbed biological sound effects. But whereas *Stereo* examines the evolution of mental processes that would eventually culminate in films like *Scanners* and *The Dead Zone*, *Crimes* ponders on the evolution/regression/mutation of the body itself – ideas which Cronenberg would develop more fully in *Rabid*, *Videodrome*, and *The Fly* (*The Brood* would be his ultimate collision of both themes). The storyline of *Crime* is more expansive and science-fictional: a young doctor explores different medical disciplines/factions that have evolved from research into an apocalyptic disease. These vary in scope from dermatology to neo-venereal diseases to a sort of therapeutic podiatry – by the time it gets to this level you get the impression that Cronenberg is pulling the audience's leg as well his cast's.

Delivered once again in the stoic, emotionless manner of *Stereo*, *Crimes*, like its predecessor, also

serves to alienate, although this time it uses the device as a reflection of its characters. Theirs is an austere, clinical world in which the child-bearing female population has all but died out. The only purpose of the male survivors is to formulate, research, and experiment. By the film's end their conclusions should be provocative but instead become just as detached as everything else that has gone before, leaving us to wonder what the 'crimes' of the future really are. Or perhaps, ending where the film does, the title refers to crimes of the future beyond that of the present story. It could be for this reason that in the final scene the protagonist sheds a single tear. It's about time: after two features and two hours of calculation, Cronenberg is ready to put his obsessions to more direct work. What's probably most interesting about this intimate pair of films is that they give no indication of the global cult status and success that their director was to earn. Footnote: Cronenberg gave 1998's *eXistenZ* the working title *Crimes of the Future*, which led to many fans anticipating – or dreading – a revisitation of his early experimental style.

STIR OF ECHOES (1999) 99m. For a basic story, *Stir of Echoes* does a pretty good job of looking like unfamiliar territory. Kevin Bacon is a self-confessed 'ordinary' working stiff who is put under hypnosis as part of a parlor trick and then finds himself haunted by hallucinations. Writer-director David Koepp puts his own spin on Richard Matheson's novel, revealing new characters and snippets of information in an effectively serpentine manner. Bacon's visions are somehow connected to real events either happening in the past, the future, or the very present. Sometimes they are unsettling flashforwards into his own life, other times unfocused scenes from places and people unknown to him (the film's one irony is that Bacon's occupation as a lineman requires him to 'make connections' and maintain lines of communication). It's all very intriguing, but Koepp, more experienced as a writer than a director, makes a conscious choice not to sustain it. Aware that there is only so much mystery an audience can take, he turns the second half of the story into a sort of practical reaction to the first. By this point Koepp has been generous enough with his choice of visions to enable us to piece together the underlying story and even the pattern of events likely to follow. In what amounts to a cleverly subtle crossover the audience is unwittingly placed into the protagonist's shoes, having the required amount of prescience to predict key images and scenes of its own. And we have been very neatly prepped for this by the hypnosis scene, during which Bacon is told to imagine he is sitting in a darkened movie theatre (of course the screen turns black at this point, and it becomes *us* in that subjective chair), just one of many moments in the movie, creepy, funny, or just nifty, that may manage a smirk of delight from you.

It's what is operating below the surface that gives *Stir of Echoes* edginess. Ask yourself why you feel this film seems to keep pushing itself anxiously forward and you might notice the restless backdrop surrounding its characters. There is a sense of great masses of people journeying and relocating themselves, as if the voices of the unconscious are forever pressing around us. The crossover / connection / journey motif is emphasized by background traffic noise, trains roaring by and passenger jets flying overhead; a line of stalled cars causes a precognition from Bacon which in turn leads to a crowded bus station; and even at the film's end, when all seems resolved, the last word we see drawn to the camera is 'Moving'. Significantly, the final frames linger on reflections from the windows of a moving car, the soundtrack implying that this particular journey is far from over.

Stir of Echoes has drawn much comparison with *The Sixth Sense*, but only because of the timing of its theater release. The more obvious match, if you have to make one, is *The Shining*. Here too we have a boy connected to the spirit world by an invisible friend; fleeting visions of the past and future; a family/marriage under stress; a father who shares a diluted version of his young son's telepathic powers; an older black man who recognizes these powers on sight; a father becoming unhinged (when he snaps at his wife in the back yard, Bacon seems a lot like Jack Nicholson – otherwise his performance is completely his own, and a finely-tuned one at that) and a bewildered wife/mother armed with a knife. The last scene of the film needs only an intermission to separate it from the opening shots of *The Shining*,

which could be a logical extension and conclusion to the fledging powers at work in this story. The echoes continue to reverberate. In-joke: the family's babysitter reads a Matheson novel, 'The Shrinking Man'. I read 'A Stir of Echoes' several years ago, and have forgotten much of it except for some detail about a woman in a yellow coat….perhaps those echoes of long ago make me an ideal viewer for this film. I even owned the exact same paperback as the babysitter. I'm sitting in a darkened movie theater….I am getting sleepy….

THE STUPIDS (1996) 94m. This silly comedy by John Landis could have been created for the screen without any reference to the children's storybooks by Harry Allard and James Marshall, but I suppose a copyrighted title like 'The Stupids' was too good to pass up. The film utilizes the stories' characters and their pets (computer-animated in the style of Marshall's illustrations) but the plot is far trickier than their simple adventures in print. What's great about *The Stupids* is that its storyline is made of the flimsiest of ideas, thrown together with such abandon that you'll probably think scriptwriter Brent Forrester made the whole thing up as he went along. Without giving away the gag that sets the story into motion, Stanley Stupid (Tom Arnold) believes there is foul play at work in his neighborhood. After launching his own investigation he concludes that he has discovered a dastardly scheme of global proportions. His wife and two children, who are just as oblivious to the real world as he is, don't need much convincing. Living up to their family name, all four of them embark on a series of misadventures, which, of course, ends up with them unraveling a genuine conspiracy playing out right under their noses.

The humor of *The Stupids* is a lot smarter than its title suggests, although like many comedies it resorts to slapstick for the finale. The film's highlight has Arnold explaining his conspiracy theory to the rest of the family while we see it being played out for us in his mind (Christopher Lee is a hilarious asset to this scene). It perfectly encapsulates both the world the Stupids live in and the rationale of the script, which derives its humor from the way that Stanley and his family create bizarre hypotheses to explain the most ordinary of day-to-day situations. Clearly, the children have been brought up with the same insulated logic as their parents – they too misinterpret the most basic of encounters. This allows the characters to interact in different combinations without having any one smarter family member offsetting the balance – for example, Father and Daughter believe they have died because the lights have suddenly been turned off (this is taken from the original stories); Mother and Son figure out that an elevator must be a time machine; Brother and Sister are convinced that their parents are being held for ransom in a Chinese restaurant; Mom and her children try to use a computer and blow up the office; Mom rushes into a wig shop to get a disguise and emerges covered entirely in wigs; and of course the family's patron, Stanley, creates mayhem wherever he goes on his crusade to save the world (he also gets to sing a hilariously complicated song about his family tree).

The Stupids was generally slammed by critics and didn't do as well as other films by Landis, which is a shame as it has a goofy, easy-going charm that is absent in many of his later films. One likely reason for its failure is that the public had had enough of Tom Arnold's tabloid-grabbing antics with former wife Roseanne Barr. But I think Arnold, happily traipsing about in his powder-blue suit and straw hat, is a good choice for Stanley Stupid. Bigger comedy stars would have no doubt stamped their own brand of personality over the top of the character – they would have certainly outshone the rest of the family, whose parts are conspicuously underplayed. I have to assume that this flat acting style was a conscious choice of Landis, who didn't want his cast to mug it up. Landis fans will also be quick to spot his trademark 'See You Next Wednesday' message incorporated into the film, a sight gag he uses to show that he has included material from an unused screenplay he once wrote as a teenager. His other trademark – using fellow directors in cameos – is a little harder to spot, unless you really know your film-makers. Film buffs may recognize Robert Wise as Stanley's neighbor. Wise/Stupid. Do you think that's another Landis in-joke? Look for the re-named London Symphony Orchestra in the final credits.

SUMMER SCHOOL (1987) 94m. A surprise for anyone expecting just another dumb teen sex comedy, although Carl Reiner's involvement as director should indicate something more than the usual fluff. Freddy Shoop (Mark Harmon) is a gym teacher forced into teaching remedial English for the summer with a bunch of teenagers who are just as unmotivated as he is. While *Summer School* is rooted in familiar genre conventions (a beach scene, a party, forgettable pop/rock music on the soundtrack) it noticeably steers clear of the expected plot conventions (e.g. the revenge-by-humiliation ritual that usually climaxes films of this type). After the first few minutes it looks like the 'dumb teen sex comedy' genre is about to give way to the even more repellent high-school cliché of 'unorthodox teacher inspires misfit kids to succeed'. Without giving away the film's ending, which is more realistic than you'd expect, *Summer School* heads into that territory but does make a few compromises.

Summer School's script is full of clever lines and snappy dialogue, particularly in the exchanges between Harmon and neighboring teacher Kirstie Alley. The kids are all 'character types' but they aren't the usual jerks we see in high school comedies, and even the standard authority-figure villain (Robin Thomas) isn't the stock type – for a moment you'll wonder if he's secretly amused at the outrageous prank the class pulls on their substitute teacher. Harmon and Alley spar well together – I don't know if this role helped her land the part of Rebecca Howe in *Cheers* (it was in the same year) but there's obvious similarities. She's immensely likable, as is the easy-going Harmon. The class is also likable, despite their limited screen time as individual characters. Even Harmon's dog is likable! What's odd about this film is that although there's no nudity, sex or drugs, there is some coarse language (it's all compressed into one early scene!) and gore (we see 'highlights' from a 16mm print of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) that lifts it out of any family viewing category. There's also a pregnant teenager played by Shawnee Smith, a minor role which is treated in an unsensational manner and with a surprisingly practical resolution. Her fellow students include Dean Cameron and Courtney Thorne-Smith, who had already struggled with high school life in the TV series *Fast Times*. The happy final shot, which has a spontaneous feel to it, sums up the spirit of the whole movie.

THE SWIMMER (1968) 94m. When we first see Ned Merrill (Burt Lancaster) dive into a pool and then jump out again he is spry, jovial, and optimistic. By the time he has had his last swim he is a broken man, wading in and hauling himself out. Director Frank Perry's cult favorite follows Lancaster's progress from one residential home to another as he plots his route (on foot) back to his hillside mansion according to the availability of swimming pools in the area. Lancaster knows his wealthy neighbors well, but we soon discover that he has been out of touch for some time, and that they know something we don't.

Despite our introduction to Lancaster's character, who is full of compliments and *bon homie*, we can't help feeling doubtful about him. Part of this is due to that fixed, trademark Lancaster grin and his constant promises and appointments (which mount up until we realize he can never remember them all), but I believe much of the discomfort we feel is also due to his appearance. Dressed only in swimming trunks, he is exposed to the elements, constantly getting wet and drying off. It isn't long before he is footsore and shivering (significantly, the only time we see him inside a building is when he is showering). It appears that Lancaster is stuck halfway – he is baring his physical self but not his soul. Does he realize he has a problem? Perry's use of light flare and out-of-focus links perpetuate Lancaster's confused state of mind – his head is in the clouds, as his constant ruminations about the sky testify; his conversations with people consist almost wholly of reminiscences. Interestingly, the moment we associate Lancaster's reveries with denial, the characters he encounters start to change. Initially full of good cheer, they become more hostile throughout the film's course. Because the tricky script concentrates mostly on Lancaster we don't notice that half the people he meets are probably just as screwed up as he is. Perry equates the status symbol of the backyard pool with all the snobbery and foibles of the *nouveau-rich*. They don't want him in their pools / they don't want him in their social circle. By the time Lancaster has reached the public

baths at the end of his journey, he has descended into an overcrowded, overchlorinated hell. It was a journey he had to make: he just failed to recognize the real reason.

TALK RADIO (1989) 110m. Oliver Stone's film of Eric Bogosian's stage play (they collaborated on the screenplay) was received favorably by critics but ended up unnoticed by the public amid Stone's bigger-budget successes. It begins and ends with marathon performances by Bogosian in the role of Barry Champlain, a Dallas shock-jock on the verge of being syndicated nationwide. Everything about Champlain is on the edge, including his rocky relationships with producer/girlfriend Leslie Hope, wife Ellen Greene, and boss Alec Baldwin. Isolated in his darkened studio, he rants to unseen callers as if he were addressing his invisible demons. His listening audience is largely hostile, and he is always on the attack. At first we are prepared to accept Champlain as a champion for the underdog, but as more and more callers run the gauntlet of his show we grow to mistrust him. The moment we believe he has finally lost his balance is when he turns on one of his admirers and insults her mercilessly, using exactly the same type of confrontational and interruptive tactics he reserves for the bigots, fascists, and junkies that comprise most of his audience.

Champlain is so unpredictable and fast-talking that it is difficult for us to figure out his real agenda. But he doesn't seem to have one. It's the line he snaps to a detractor at a ball game that gives him away, when he tells her the reason she doesn't like his show is because she has no sense of humor. Champlain is no activist, merely an egotist who is running his own private put-on (similarly, *Talk Radio* masquerades as an issues piece but is essentially a character study) and is concerned only with his ratings. There are moments he has on air when he looks as if he may let the mask slip – but he has gone too far to turn back now.

Clearly, enjoyment of *Talk Radio* will depend on how much you like Bogosian's performance. The scenes with him on the air crackle thanks to Stone's charged direction and tight editing by David Brenner and Joe Hutshing. If you've ever listened to late-night talkback and found some of the callers unsettling, you're bound to relive that feeling in the paranoid atmosphere of Champlain's studio. Bogosian's meeting with an incoherent teenager (Michael Wincott) is by turns hilarious and chilling. He's just one of several memorable callers, many of whom were voiced by the same group of actors. The inspiration for both film and play was the assassination of Denver DJ Alan Berg by White Supremacists – exactly the kind of audience that would be incensed by Champlain's uncompromising broadcasts.

TANK GIRL (1995) 104m. Most people who'd read the comics by Alan Martin and Jamie Hewlett hated this live-action film version, although I think that says more about the quality of the comic books than the movie. The setting is familiar enough: a post-apocalyptic future, mostly desert, with rag-tag rebels fighting an evil overlord for water. *Tank Girl* doesn't want to commit to being set in either America or Australia, so settles for both (or neither) which would make more sense if the rest of the story was treated in the same way, i.e. an excerpt from a larger scenario rather than a complete arc. It was undoubtedly even more annoying for readers of the comic who saw Tank Girl's 'history' being rewritten for the screen.

The film-makers may have made some bad decisions in *Tank Girl* but they did get the casting right for the lead role. Even though much of the casual vulgarity of the original character was removed, Lori Petty still makes a spunky, perky Tank Girl. I don't think we need to see the processes responsible for her transformation into the heroine of the title, however, nor the introduction to her friend Jet Girl (less convincingly assumed by Naomi Watts). Since Petty's character remains consistent throughout the movie, it wouldn't have mattered if Tank and Jet smashed their way on to the screen from frame one.

In fact, the whole story is just wrong for these two characters – they should have had more desert time, tank time and jet time instead of spending most of the movie indoors. The rebel band of genetically modified kangaroo men ('rippers') is also a mistake. Their scenes drag and they fare no better than animated action figures. And lastly, the movie's potential star attraction – namely, the tank – is badly wasted. This overblown variation of the gun-as-penis metaphor is perfect for the sexually aggressive Petty (the theme from *Shaft* plays when she drapes herself all over the tank's barrel, sighing "I'm in love") but appears too late into the story. The tank, which receives an effectively scrappy makeover, is relegated to night sequences which fail to show it off to its best advantage; similarly Jet Girl's stolen jet makes only one appearance in its newly-liberated form before it gets repainted back into its former military colors.

With its lead characters, props and source material, *Tank Girl* could have been a blast. Director Rachel Talalay was forced to cut material, but having seen the missing footage I can't see any way it would have improved the film. You may find yourself wishing that the film-makers had decided to ditch the live action concept and extended *Tank Girl*'s two brilliantly animated sequences into a full feature instead. Why not? Petty's already got that cartoon-character voice down pat.

THALASSA, THALASSA! RETURN TO THE SEA (1994) 89m. A children's film from Romania like no other – if it is a children's film. It's a little hard to tell, although I can imagine the concept of the story would be quite appealing to young viewers. Its simple plot depicts the journey of seven Romanian children from their arid village to the coast 40 kilometers away (I won't spoil things by saying how). As with all road movies, the journey is more significant than the destination – but it's light years away from anything Hollywood would come up with.

The portrayal of children in cinema has been a long-running bone of contention for me – they're always precocious, articulate, or cute. In short, they're always acting. And it's pretty hard for children to act like children when their lines are written by adults. *Thalassa* brings to the screen the most natural representation of children I can remember seeing – everything they say or do is so real it'll make you wonder if you were really like that at their age. You were. And their world of logic is so abstruse it ultimately pervades the structure of the story. It's almost as if writer-director Bogdan Dumitrescu has let his child actors choose the direction and events of his film – it certainly has an improvisational feel to it. But these kids aren't the typically cute ensemble we've seen in countless other films. Their natures are capricious and arbitrary. They switch allegiances to each other and think primarily of themselves, and they take absolutely nothing seriously. As the story progresses, *Thalassa* takes on surreal overtones – the landscape is blasted and desolate; the children dress in oversized clothes looted from a suitcase; and in separate instances, a couple of the characters simply drop out of the story – their disappearances are never explained, although we may be right to suspect violence.

It's worth bearing in mind that 100,000 orphans were still being relocated around Romania at the time this film was conceived – Dumitrescu may be taking a shot at the bureaucratic procrastination which left a few thousand children contracting the AIDS virus in substandard institutions. His cast is as carefree and scruffy as any group of street kids we would care to imagine. *Thalassa* doesn't really have any feel-good moments until the ambiguous ending, which makes us realize that no matter how much some children go through, the only thing they really live for is the moment. Does this trivialize the rest of the film? Who cares. By the time they're openly celebrating you'll be just as unconcerned about consequence as they are. It's worth showing in a classroom, if only for the lively discussion which is sure to follow.

THERESE AND ISABELLE (1968) 118m.

Don't let it worry you that this film draws sniggers from gay audiences who are used to a more up-front, in-your-face style of contemporary cinema. Radley Metzger's film of two girls who fall in love is one of his best efforts – more interesting than the dull *Camille 2000* and less 'arty' than *The Lickerish Quartet* (which takes this film's commingling of past/present to extremes). It's also interesting to look

back on now in light of the path that Metzger's career took – as the times became more permissive he eventually settled into making hardcore porn.

Therese (Barbara Laage) visits the now-empty finishing school she attended as a young girl. Her travels around the grounds and through the dorms remind her of Isabelle (Anna Gael), her only true friend there. The glances that Therese and Isabelle give each other suggest early on that they are attracted to each other romantically – eventually they will become lovers. *Therese and Isabelle* has all the ingredients of prime exploitation – French schoolgirls, a sexually repressive atmosphere, forbidden love – yet vies for decorum. The scene in which the two girls rent a room for a chance to be alone is particularly well handled. Elegantly shot in widescreen black and white, and set in beautiful (natural and architectural) locations, *Therese and Isabelle* is something of an oddity. Certainly there were few films of this type intended for legitimate theatrical distribution in the late 60s (it would be only a couple of years later that nudity and sex would suddenly run rampant in commercial cinema). The inclusion of scenes involving masturbation and oral sex are particularly daring – although Metzger would have fared better if he had left out the purple prose dubbed over them, as what reads erotically on the printed page doesn't always translate well on screen. As in *Claire's Knee*, you may find the most erotic moment of this film one of the most simple: Isabelle recites a poem while Therese strokes her lightly with her fingertips. *Therese and Isabelle* isn't a great movie, but it is much better than it could have been, and provides a useful addition to other more widely-discussed entries in cinema's ongoing 'Is it Art or Exploitation?' debate.

There isn't a lot of sexual/romantic chemistry between Gael and Laage (the casting of older actresses to play schoolgirls is almost a necessary flaw – Metzger would have been condemned if he'd used real teenagers) and consequently the ending of the film isn't as sad as it should be. I don't see that it hurts the story – as it is framed within Therese's reminiscences it is more appropriately wistful. This is part and parcel of the 'European' feel that Metzger was aiming for. It may be too demure or affected for modern audiences, but the type of contemporary gay cinema that assertively draws attention to sexuality isn't necessarily progressive – it's just reactionary. *Therese and Isabelle* is not driven by sexual politics; it is simply a love story. The fact that the two lovers are female is inconsequential, for gay audiences or otherwise.

THEY LIVE (1988) 93m. At last, a movie for those of us who wanted those X-Ray glasses we saw advertised in comics when we were kids. Forgotten by all but John Carpenter devotees, this SF-horror flick is worth checking out. Wrestler 'Rowdy' Roddy Piper plays a drifter who hooks up with a bunch of shanty-town dwellers. Inadvertently he becomes aware of an alien conspiracy which has been in effect on Earth for years. Produced while Carpenter's career seemed to be in a lull, this is nevertheless one of his most enjoyable outings; a snappy-paced romp that stays offbeat until its closing frames. What's probably most appealing about *They Live* is that it confines its global-conspiracy storyline to a radius of a few miles and a timespan of a few days. Carpenter, taking a cue from his own favorite SF films of the 50s, realizes that he doesn't need to play it big – further proof that his best work is with restricted budgets. Consequently, the most memorable moments are the simplest: Piper taking a slow walk down the block, newly aware that it is replete with aliens; Piper and work buddy Keith David stubbornly duking it out in an alley; Piper being struck by a woman he has taken hostage.

They Live is based on a (very) short story by Ray Nelson but also borrows from the Devourers in Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar stories, positing aliens not as intergalactic warlords or rapacious monsters, but as the ultimate force in asset stripping and insider trading. In this scenario, Earth will be destroyed economically. The twist is that most of the population are unknowingly contributing to its downfall. Carpenter throws in references to various forms of mass inculcation: subliminal persuasion, communists (which the human rebels are branded as in order to turn the public against them), propaganda, evangelism (the rebels broadcast from a church, and one of them is a street preacher), and most pointedly, consumerism. With this in mind, the invaders are credited as ghouls in the end titles – those who would

feed off the dead. It points the direction of the film's satire: that media-induced conformity has left us so drained of individuality/vitality that we have let ourselves become ripe for the harvesting (Since Carpenter has already worked with aliens, vampires, and ghosts, *They Live* could be seen as his 'zombie' picture).

As with all Carpenter's films, this one is great to look at – he prefers to take his horror out of the shadows and into the hyper-real with sharp, clear photography and sparkling color. Again, Carpenter contributes a businesslike, pulsating score (a touch bluesy this time around), and tosses in a minor trademark by having the characters watching an old horror movie on television. *They Live* has some shocks and violence but is mostly great fun – it's no coincidence that Carpenter counts it among his own favorites.

THOROUGHLY MODERN MILLIE (1967) 138m. This easygoing spoof of early romantic musical comedies isn't nearly as good as Ken Russell's wild version of *The Boy Friend* but does mark the only pairing of archetypal girls-next-door Julie Andrews and Mary Tyler Moore (both played the role of nuns within a few years of this film's release!). There's also a surprising turn by James Fox as an amiable playboy. Millie (Andrews), determined to keep up with the trendsetters in the Roaring 20s, meets would-be ingenue Dorothy (Moore) in a New York hotel for young ladies. They quickly become friends, unaware that evil schemes are afoot below their rooms. Contrary to its title *Thoroughly Modern Millie* has an old-fashioned look about it, even for 1967, and lacks the photographic verve of other productions by director George Roy Hill. Its main joke, I suppose, is that what passed for progress in 1922 now comes across as faddish – but as this is a criticism that can be applied to any generation, screenwriter Richard Morris sensibly avoids condescension (although I can't see many viewers endorsing Millie's ambiguous resolution "I don't want to be your equal any more – I want to be a woman"). That leaves us with a sampler of twenties confectionery: Vaudeville shows, roadsters, Gatsby-style parties, daredevil stunts (right out of Harold Lloyd), candy-striped biplanes, flapper fashions, and a subplot involving white slavery that could have come from any old Saturday serial.

Thoroughly Modern Millie wants to be a comedy, a romance, a musical, and even an action pic in places, but as a result it ends up too long. The irrelevant wedding sequence can be thrown out for a start; and the story really starts sagging in the middle when Carol Channing's character shows up – supposedly she's an embodiment of the Jazz Age, but I just find her annoying. The deliberately naive story and approach may work better for children than adults – there's something too fake about the nostalgia to make it work on any sophisticated level. Still, as with any sampler, you've got to take the marzipan with the creme. The film's funniest moment is when Andrews vamps it up in her boss's office. Its most incomprehensible line: "Machines, like gloves, should be either black or white". It was produced by the king of gloss, Ross Hunter, who didn't see eye to eye with Hill. Sammy Cahn and James van Heusen wrote the catchy title tune.

THE THRILL KILLERS (1964) 69m. After force-feeding my brain *Rat Pfink a Boo Boo*, I'd pledged never again to watch any film by Z-grade writer-director-actor Ray Dennis Steckler. But I was surprised to find *The Thrill Killers* a much more tightly-made piece of work. As it stands, it's probably Steckler's best film, though admittedly that isn't saying a lot. Tightly edited, with a jazzy score and some involving sequences, it's a cut above most other Z-features, but also shares their pitfalls. The plot basically recounts the encounters between psychotics and anyone unfortunate enough to run into them, providing Stecker with an excuse to string together a number of set pieces in lieu of a plot. Its main problem is that several characters belong to different stories – it's as if Steckler started filming four different projects and then decided to put them all together for the last half. At the start we're not even sure who the main character is supposed to be, or how other characters are meant to relate to each other.

The Thrill Killers' best feature is that it's wonderfully unpredictable, although this may be a natural consequence of Steckler's seemingly undisciplined approach. He doesn't play by the rules

of conventional movies and doesn't guarantee the safety of any of the characters. This results in some inspired, demented moments. My favorite is when one psycho makes a phone call to an even more psychotic acquaintance, asking for help to get away from his 'crazy' friends! Steckler isn't really playing for laughs, though. In fact much of the violence, though offscreen, is unsettling (Steckler himself is well cast as thug 'Mad Dog' Glick). As a one-man show, Steckler has talent (next to Z-grade alumnus Herschell Gordon Lewis, he's Orson Welles), but it is uneven. It would have been interesting to see what he would have done if contracted by a studio with a bigger budget – I believe this could have been regarded as a classic B-feature if it had been made with more experienced actors and writers. If you've never seen a film by an indie director before, have a look. Just don't spend more than a dollar on it.

THUNDERBIRDS (2004) 95m. TV producer Gerry Anderson might not have been a household name in the US during the 60s, but to kids in other parts of the Western World he established a cult following that reached well beyond his target audience and endures to this day. From early school days through to high school and even university, it was hard to find someone who didn't admit to watching the unconsciously surreal *Stingray*, the casually groovy *Joe 90*, or, if you were really cool, the more sober *Captain Scarlet*. But although each had its own group of supporters, it was *Thunderbirds* which most of us agreed was the staple Anderson show. What made *Thunderbirds* popular was undoubtedly its catchy name, hour-long running time, jaunty Barry Grey theme, and futuristic vehicles lovingly crafted and rendered by model-makers who obviously cared about what they were doing.

The models were the main reason to watch shows by Anderson, who rather bizarrely mixed sci-fi technology with simple marionettes, although this was simply a consequence of starting with puppets (I use this as a catch-all term) and sticking to what he knew as he developed each new series. As time went on the look of the puppets evolved from caricature to realism, finally giving way to real actors in the shows *UFO* and *Space:1999*, who, predictably enough, played second fiddle to the spacecraft and other gadgetry around them.

The concept of the *Thunderbirds* TV series was that a wealthy philanthropist by the name of Jeff Tracy lived with his five sons on a secret island that formed the base of their global rescue organization. Each son piloted a highly technological rescue vehicle that had its own specific function (and colour) and each week two or three of these Thunderbirds would be responsible for averting some disaster. Everybody had their favourite Thunderbird (mine was always Thunderbird 4, maybe because it appeared less often than the others, or maybe because it was smaller and bright yellow) and the interpretation of the models was one of the areas where any updated version of *Thunderbirds* was always going to miss the appeal of the original series. It was never going to be an easy task to capitalize on the success of the TV show because producers were never going to be able to duplicate the impact that the Thunderbirds made upon kids back in the 60s. Of course model-making had become somewhat passé in light of CGI, and by 2004 it was decided that the Thunderbird vehicles needed a digital makeover.

If you're a *Thunderbirds* enthusiast interested in the movie for its CGI depiction of the five rescue craft doing their thing and you can accept the necessity of replacing the marionettes with live actors then you might figure that the film could be enjoyable simply as a revisitation of a childhood memory. However this is not a remake of the show so much as a nod to it. I have no doubt that fans of the original will compare checklists of every wrong decision of the movie, and that the worst offenses will be: (1) The replacement of Lady Penelope's memorable pink Rolls-Royce with a Ford; (2) Brains' fathering of a son – WHAT? – and more to the point, WITH WHO?; (3) Tin-Tin not only discovering that her uncle is Jeff Tracy's nemesis The Hood but also inheriting his telekinetic powers; (4) That annoying, ubiquitous field reporter constantly referring to International Rescue as 'The Thunderbirds'; and (5) Jeff Tracy shunting Virgil out of the cockpit in Thunderbird 2 when he should be back in the control room where he belongs. Chief among *Thunderbirds*' sins, however, is that the premise of the TV series has been abandoned just as effectively as the Tracy

boys have been marooned in space for nearly the entire story, leaving us with a movie about three kids having an adventure on an island with a few in-jokes thrown in for all of those familiar with the TV show. Most unforgivable is that the time element and suspense that was the main thrust of each episode of the series is completely absent, and if there's more suspense in a puppet show than a sixty million dollar movie, you know that something has got to be seriously wrong. If there was ever a mission for International Rescue, this script is it.

If you're not a devotee of the original, and such fanboy nitpicking is irrelevant to your viewing of the film, then *Thunderbirds* is average at best. It's non-violent and mildly entertaining but the story is made up of the same sorts of situations over again and the banter between the pre-teen heroes is just awful. Instead of seeing the Tracy family spring into the driver's seat we get father and son heart-to-hearts between Jeff Tracy (Bill Paxton) and his youngest boy Alan (somebody else) who only wants to have fun, fun, fun (but his daddy took his T-bird away). Amongst a cast that is either relegated to the periphery or dominated by kids, Ben Kingsley manages to strike a distinctly underplayed chord as arch-villain The Hood, and Sophia Myles and Ron Cook steal the show as International Rescue's London-based agents Lady Penelope and Parker, even if they do end up becoming more like the 60s TV characters *The Avengers* as the film goes on. Nearly everyone else could have been played by anyone else – Paxton has nothing to do other than act the responsible parent, while Anthony Edwards is stuck with repeating a tiresome joke about his stammer. When the five anonymous and interchangeable Tracy boys line up for their final group moment you'll be thinking less about Thunderbirds: the Sequel and pondering more about their secondary career as Thunderbirds: the Boy Band.

As adult criticisms these are, of course, more befitting an adult product. It's not that *Thunderbirds* is a bad film if you recognize its target audience as being kids (as indeed was the puppet series) and if viewed exclusively by that demographic it's a fair enough effort that has its moments. But for adults with no knowledge of the original show it plays like a bewildering promotion for toys, and for adults who used to admire it on TV as children, it's a wasted opportunity. If anything from 60s television is crying out for big-screen treatment, it has to be *Thunderbirds*.

THUNDERCRACK! (1975) 158m.

The credits begin, as promised by the film's title, with thunderbolts lighting up spooky tree branches and an old mansion on a rainy night; although in fact we're looking at camera flashbulbs, a watering can, a drawing of a house, and a twig. Independent San Francisco film-maker George Kuchar must have thought he was dreaming when he was given the opportunity to not only write but also star in this two-and-a-half hour epic directed by Curt McDowell. Sure, the budget of *Thundercrack!* is low, but at least it had a budget, which was a quantum leap from the 8mm home movies that somehow got Kuchar onto film society programmes.

The backbone of the story is simple enough – diverse characters take shelter from a storm in a mysterious old house and have kinky encounters with each other – but, figuring that this was his chance to shoot the works, Kuchar throws in just about every lapse of taste he can. In the tradition of most Southern Gothic, the characters all have secrets and repressed memories which spill out into the open and set them against each other. Kuchar gives himself the plum role as an agitated animal trainer, turning up late in the piece to put in place the last outrageous subplot. What sets *Thundercrack!* apart from other fringe cinema is its cross-pollination of black comedy, melodrama, spoof, and hardcore pornography. It is that last category that gets the most attention which is why, despite containing only 15-20 minutes of sex, *Thundercrack!* will be forever tagged as an odd porno movie. There have been arthouse efforts, considerably more polished than Kuchar's opus, that have attempted to incorporate actual sex into legitimate films, but their attempts to 'casually' drop these scenes into the narrative don't really work because we know about them beforehand and spend the non-pornographic sections of the movie anticipating them.

I think that *Thundercrack!* succeeds where these other more 'significant' films fail (you can't

convince me that any such highbrow film isn't exploitation at heart) because everything in it is so patchy and off-the-wall that the sex scenes, though surprising at first, become just another part of the overall weirdness. On any level other than 'underground' or 'cult', however, it's far less successful. I admire Kuchar and McDowell for reaching so obviously above their means – *Thundercrack!* has an unexpected sense of conviction – but the fact is that this is a film that's more famous for being made than it is for being good. The actors are all novices (Marion Eaton simpers her way through most of the dialogue as a faded Southern Belle with stick-on eyebrows), the sets are claustrophobic (generally there are only three walls in each room), and the score, which features a chord-pounding piano, wears out its welcome long before the end. I'm not a fan of Kuchar's work, but I like him in *Thundercrack!* His carefree, comedic tone manages to keep it enjoyable, although at 158 minutes it's not an easy watch for those who are uninitiated with alternative indie pictures and more than likely the kind of thing that Trash collectors like to put on the TV just to see the reaction of their friends. Speaking of which: I haven't read any trivia books about the hit TV series *Friends*, but I'd like to know who came up with the name 'Chandler Bing' for one of its characters, given that two of the characters in this movie are named Chandler and Bing. Coincidence? Probably no more than one of the producers of the film bearing the handle John Thomas.

TIME CODE (2000) 97m. In the 60s Andy Warhol was responsible for producing a number of experiments in cinema. It wasn't so much the films themselves than the audiences that Warhol found interesting – by showing static, lengthy opuses he was actually encouraging his viewers to get bored and talk to their neighbors. His experiments with simultaneous projection were pretty much cut of the same cloth: cinematic narrative is arbitrary and you watch what you want when it suits. Bring on *Woodstock*. Bring on Brian De Palma. Split-screen perspective was less about narrative deconstruction than it was of gimmickry – even Abel Gance knew that when he made *Napoleon* in 1927. End of story, you might think, but not quite, because developments in digital technology eventually allowed us to throw a fresh coat of paint on the old split-screen wagon. In *Time Code*, director Mike Figgis uses the then-new lightweight Sony DSR-I to synchronize not two, but four narrative divisions on the cinema screen. You want more? The separate narratives have all been filmed simultaneously on one Friday afternoon. Improvised. In unbroken 93-minute takes.

Let's put aside the storyline – or storylines – for a moment and address a more obvious issue: how do you watch something like this? More pertinently, how do you watch four screens when one of them always focuses on Salma Hayek in a snug-fitting top? Figgis knows ahead of time which screen his viewers are going to be drawn to, and this is the most impressive aspect of his film. The fast-tracking digital countdowns in the title credits are there to advertise the logistical feat that he has accomplished. Although his actors and camera operators improvise around a preset framework of circumstances, they are each given a 'time code' to follow – a sort of time clock which must be punched at intervals throughout the film. This most noticeably occurs during periodic earth tremors, but also effectively in moments where all frames are simultaneously filled with close-ups of faces, telephone conversations, characters in restrooms, or contemplative scenes that allow the musical soundtrack to engage with the action.

You would think the theme underlying Figgis' work would be one of unification, but he takes the opposite tack, and it works just as well. *Time Code* is set in and around a small-time film studio, where we see actors, producers, writers, and directors sifting through the bric-a-brac that passes for their daily management. It seems an amusingly perfect setting for *Time Code*'s sensibilities: the studio execs' juggling act is in symmetry with Figgis' own deployment of images on screen, but there the similarity ends. Instead of harmony we find duplicity. The multiple screens become testament to untruths, causing us to debunk one character's assertion that the tyranny of montage (as per Eisenstein) has resulted in 75 years of manipulation and lies. If the implication is that the opposite must be true, then *Time Code* rejects that also: unedited footage does not prescribe integrity, as evidenced by the continual

deceptions perpetrated in real-time before our eyes. But that's okay. Figgis has undertaken his project with humor, and tips us a self-referential wink every now and then without coming across as smug. His orchestrated synchronicities are not designed to dazzle us into an oh-gosh appreciation of his technical skill, they are there to elicit grins. You smile because it's cute, because it all seems made up even though you know it isn't. *Time Code* is a confidence that we have been taken into, and we enjoy participating in the director's game.

It takes a confident film-maker to place his work so heavily in the hands of his actors and camera operators (essentially second and third unit directors), and it's heartening to see another contemporary talent trying to mess around in the mainstream. See this in a theater if you can, otherwise make sure you've got a big screen TV if video is your only option (those four divisions could get mighty small). And don't touch that pause button. You know Mike wouldn't want you to.

TINTIN AND ME (2003) 74m. A fine cinematic companion to Harry Thompson's enlightening text 'Tintin: Hergé and his Creation'. Translated into 58 different languages, honored with a statue, and selling millions of books worldwide, Hergé (aka Georges Remy: GR reversed is RG, or 'Her-ge') managed the unlikely feat of being both a cult figure and a popular bestselling author. More specifically: cult for adults, popular for children. Anders Ostergaard's documentary manipulates black-and-white solarised footage of Hergé (transforming him into one of his *ligne claire* drawings) and synchs it with audio recordings of him being interviewed in 1971.

It's interesting to see that as far back as the 1930s a children's comic was being observed critically by adults – had Hergé started writing nearer the end of the 20th century his work would have undoubtedly been tagged 'graphic novels' and wouldn't be consigned exclusively to the children's section of the bookstores. Those who have known Tintin only through reading the books as children themselves may be surprised to see the politics at work behind the stories – starting as a mouthpiece for a fascist Catholic journal, with the task of proselytizing the publisher's values to a children's audience, Hergé ironically found himself in turn suppressed by the same fascism in World War II during the German occupation of his native Belgium. As a result he changed the direction of the stories towards escapist fantasies and created a supporting cast of characters who brought a whole new level of interplay to the stories.

The presence of writers Thompson and Michael Farr lend authority to the doco, but I would liked to have seen other comic artists speak of their reaction to the Tintin books, particularly Uderzo, whose 'Asterix' albums have remained Tintin's only rival. There's also room in the documentary for other famous names, such as Steven Spielberg, who have acknowledged the influence of the stories (Andy Warhol does appear briefly, but appears to speak even less English than Hergé does). The viewpoints of any of these people would have been worthwhile if only to hear which volume they would claim as their personal favorite (different books have different supporters). For example, 'The Blue Lotus' is mentioned as Hergé's masterpiece by Farr, although critics have cited both 'The Calculus Affair' as a significant development and 'The Castiafore Emerald' as a combined antithesis/apotheosis of his work, while Hergé himself prefers 'The Secret of the Unicorn' (I guess I'm in the minority with 'Flight 714'). And then there is 'Tintin in Tibet', which gets more screen time than other books because it is the most psychologically revealing of Hergé's work, not only as a means of exorcising his 'white dreams' but also to bring closure to his life-long search for a fellow artist named Zhang Chongren, who had inspired the book's character of Chang. The real-life ending to this search is just as serendipitous as Hergé's fictional one, and ultimately complicated by it – by this stage, Hergé and Zhang have become Tintin and Chang in the public eye. Still, it is a cinematic moment that fans of the comics will treasure. And real Tintinphiles will be captivated by the sequence where computer rendering makes it possible for the camera to traverse the planes of a 'Tintin in Tibet' comic panel three-dimensionally. Ostergaard uses different visual effects and an

effective musical backing (which you may not notice) to keep the documentary moving. If there is any unanimous complaint among viewers of *Tintin and I*, it would be that it is too short.

Footnote: It is not made clear in the film that when Hergé created his own studio, the resulting publication 'Tintin' was a magazine featuring work and stories by different artists, and not the complete Tintin adventures more commonly recognized in album form. The magazine's only competition was the publication 'Spirou' – which should make it clear to viewers what Hergé finds so amusing during one of the anecdotes he shares during his interview.

TITANIC (1997) 194m. It's no surprise that director James Cameron came to choose the sinking of the Titanic as a film project. A glance at his earlier work will tell you why: this man makes the bluest looking movies around. *The Abyss, Aliens, The Terminator*. If he isn't going to set some future opus in the North Pole I'll eat my hat.

If you're going to watch this movie, then it has to be in a cinema, or home cinema at least. If you'd rather settle for video, then you might as well stick a toy boat in the bath and watch that instead. In the spirit of the old Hollywood epics, *Titanic* – no tautology intended – is big. Cameron is to be applauded for resuscitating the Hollywood epic, but what does he have to offer that's new? I'd like to think it was more than a budget blowout on huge-scale models and state-of-the-art special effects. This story, after all, has been told many times before. His film is definitely more engaging than the torpid 1953 *Titanic* with Clifton Webb (after 45 minutes I was rooting for the iceberg) but doesn't have the emotional edge of the classic *A Night to Remember*. In fact, it's due to the latter that Cameron's *Titanic* fails to hit me at gut level. I'd already seen the class divisions, the injustice, the incompetence, and the unlucky coincidences, so I was more interested, this time around, to see how Cameron would transport me to the scene of the disaster; how he would make me empathise with that sense of tremendous loss and overwhelming fear.

But instead, he backs off. All the manipulative moments you would expect never arrive: the panic for the lifeboats, the noble self-sacrifices, the sudden topsy-turvy devaluation and re-evaluation of human lives. There's an early shot of two silky Afghan hounds boarding the ship which subconsciously files itself away for later reference: Future Camera Shot – Dogs Struggling Helpless and Bewildered in the Water. A sympathy-grabbing moment for sure, but he doesn't let it happen. Cameron is more interested in recreating the disaster, not reliving it, so he distils the humanity of the story into a doomed love affair between two characters, third-class passenger Leonardo DiCaprio and upper-class Kate Winslet. And it would not be a proper love story if it were not a triangle, which is where Billy Zane comes in. We know straight away that Zane is completely wrong for Winslet (let's face it, after *Dead Calm* who's ever going to trust this guy on a boat again?) but it takes two hours of screen time before he gets the message, by which time the ship is sinking and the real reason everybody went to see the movie finally gets underway. But even here the tragedy of the event is absent – the story merely shifts from a romance on a floating ship to an adventure on a sinking ship, and Cameron's throwaway moments of comic relief prevent the terror from properly crystallizing.

The sinking itself is certainly a spectacle, and you can see where all the money went, but it seems that the whole thing is just too big for Cameron to really enjoy himself with. He isn't directing so much as orchestrating, and it's annoying that *Titanic* won Oscars even though it doesn't have the same flair of his other films. A lot of *Titanic* isn't original, and the ending, which has been a staple of sentimental finales since the silent days of *The Three Musketeers*, is terribly clichéd, but it is still well worth your time. For three hours running time it has a terrific sense of pace, and there is at least one moment that captures the essence of the disaster perfectly: the camera switches its viewpoint to that of the survivors in the lifeboats, watching the now nearly-vertical Titanic from afar with incredulous horror. By itself, this moment would be nothing. But placed as it is, amid an ocean of 194 minutes of film, those few seconds become the only connection Cameron needs to make. It works because it taps into the one level on which we moviegoers can truly empathise: not as participants in a tragedy, but rather as observers of that tragedy.

TITICUT FOLLIES (1967) 84m. Using a style that became popularly known in the 60s as fly-on-the-wall, film-maker Frederick Wiseman captured some remarkably frank footage inside the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Bridgewater. Wiseman, a documentarian who prefers to take on institutions rather than individuals, makes us forget his presence behind the camera even though he is squarely in the middle of the action, but in *Titicut Follies* his invisibility is mostly due to the spellbinding footage he confronts us with. It's a given to expect any film set inside a mental institution to be a critique, and it's human nature to sympathize with the controlled rather than the controllers, but in *Follies* we're taken so far beyond our personal experience of human beings that we're left bewildered. The inmates range from articulate to physically malformed and exhibit such a variety of behavior and mannerisms that I'm sure actors study this film in preparation for any roles as psychiatric patients. Among the most memorable are a guy who gabbles like an auctioneer, a political theorist whose polemic eventually loses the plot, and a fast-talker who believes that being institutionalized is damaging him mentally and physically. It's this last patient that provides the film with one of many unforgettable scenes, in which his argument – that 18 months of medication is impairing his faculties – makes sense but fails to convince an assessment board because of his agitated delivery. Watching the therapists bloodlessly pick over and analyze his remarks afterwards will make you feel uneasy, like many other scenes in this film. The capper, sure to make you squirm, is a later sequence in which a starving inmate is force-fed (this is also the only time where Wiseman includes a couple of noticeable flash-forward edits).

Wiseman's film is famous for being banned (note the dry tone of his disclaimer after the final credit) and you can bet it wasn't the inmates who kicked up the fuss. If *Follies* had presented the prison wardens as neutral functionaries, our attitude towards the prisoners may have been murkier – after all, this is an institution for the criminally insane – however Wiseman dishes out the rope aplenty and the wardens promptly string themselves up with it. There's a psychiatrist who appears to have graduated from the Mel Brooks school of Funny German Doctors, and a supervisor who turns into the Institution's answer to Ed Sullivan whenever the camera is pointed in his direction, but the most obnoxious is a guard who can't stop hectoring one prisoner by patronizingly repeating his first name. In fact the behavior of everyone within the Institution's four walls is so eccentric right across the board that I can't tell if the film's opening musical number is being performed by guards, prisoners, or both. It certainly sets audiences up with a loopy overture. Decades later, *Follies* still fascinates – the spectacle of human life gone awry will make you angry, amused, puzzled and pondering. Unusually, Wiseman puts a high price tag on his documentaries to get them circulated in institutions rather than being owned by individuals. Check out your local library, university, or film society.

TOMORROW I'LL WAKE UP AND SCALD MYSELF WITH TEA (1977) 90m. The paradoxes of time travel are well known in popular culture, courtesy of not only the movies but also Ray Bradbury's economical short story 'A Sound of Thunder', which made public the concept of altering the present by altering the past. Hence the idea of encountering our past selves has now been explored in everything from serious sci-fi to comedies like *Back to the Future* and *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. Combining this paradox with that old time-travel saw, "what if you could go back in time and kill Hitler?", the idea behind this modestly-budgeted Czech SF is that a group of revolutionaries in the future make a plan to break the safety protocols of Time-Travel Sightseeing Holidays so they may alter the course of World War II. The twist is that these guys are not out to put an end to Hitler, but to give him the hydrogen bomb and help the Axis powers win the war (screenwriter Josef Nesvadba had already covered the flip side of this idea in an earlier Czech SF film, in which a group of activists return to the past to kill Einstein and prevent the bomb from ever being built).

The future in Czechoslovakia looks suspiciously like 1977 and there's very little in the way of futuristic gadgets or dramatic societal changes apart from the convenient plot device of anti-ageing pills (FX

budget so far: one bottle of aspirin) but the film-makers aren't about to apologize for that – their story is about ideas, not visual effects. In *Tomorrow*, the concerns of the characters are just as mundane as the same ones people have always had: not having enough money, finding the right girl to marry, holding on to a job, etc. Karel (Petr Kostka) is a 'time tourism' rocket pilot who goes about his missions as if he were making domestic flights between cities. The tourists treat it just as casually ("Oh, look Patrick, there's Hitler!") which perhaps creates a futuristic ambience just as convincing as those flamboyant cityscape FX we've seen in bigger movies. After all, the future isn't that awesome to anyone actually living in it. At first, the development of *Tomorrow* looks to be the standard blueprint for any time travel story: characters venture into the past, deal with a bit of temporal shock (as opposed to culture shock), have an adventure, and then return. The adventure, however, ends halfway through the film, after which the second half of the film plays around with the first half. It has neat touches without trying to be too clever, and manages to tie the loose ends up in a way that wouldn't be possible in other movies.

If *Tomorrow* has anything wanting, it is a sense of pace that would show off the farcical elements inherent in any story involving time travel *and* a womanizing twin brother. Compare, for example, the energy of the *Back to the Future* films which use similar ideas but are aided with tight editing, lively performances and exciting musical scores. *Tomorrow* is cut more like a TV show than a movie, and the irresistibly cheesy music makes it seem like Sci-Fi for lounge lizards – a clear indication that Nesvadba and director Jindrich Polak were more interested in the comic side of their subject rather than the science-fictional. Perhaps it's the low-key approach to the humor in this film that makes one scene more pointed than it would have been had the story taken itself more seriously: the visitors from the future show Hitler newsreel footage of the fall of the Third Reich, and he watches the disastrous retreat from the Russian Front and the destruction of Dresden with utter bewilderment. Would we, in the same position, consider destiny as already written? Kostka accepts that some events are preordained – he knows he will once again scald his arm with tea after he has been returned to the previous day – but that doesn't stop characters in the story from trying to fix up their past mistakes and more often than not create new ones in their place. After all, as Marx said, history repeats itself; the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce.

TOYS (1992) 118m. I doubt many people were prepared for this whimsical project from Barry Levinson, especially considering the solid base of reality that his previous works had been grounded in. Apart from occasionally flirting with the fantastic (allegory in *The Natural*, hallucinations in *Young Sherlock Holmes*) Levinson had not been pegged as a fantasy director by the Hollywood establishment, so it's interesting to discover that *Toys* was intended as his directorial debut (he made *Diner* instead). It's just as well he postponed it for ten years – given its ambitious nature and lavish production I don't see how he could have made it back then.

Toys is set in a toy factory (which looks like a kind of kiddie *Metropolis*) inherited by a cashiered General (Michael Gambon) who is less than happy about losing his career in the army for a future in a toyshop, especially one run by his frivolous nephew (Robin Williams, in another of his kid-who-never-grew-up roles). The world of *Toys* is too innocent by half, which is why it comes as no surprise to us when the General decides to exploit the factory's production concepts for his own ends. The story is inventive and otherwordly, but even after ten years of thought it doesn't appear that Levinson has gotten it quite right – I think the ending, while logical in light of where the film is heading, is unsatisfying, for one thing. But as *Toys* is set in a world where nothing is what it appears, any intangibility on Levinson's part can only seem fitting. It's as if he remembered a dream and tried to visualize it for others to see. I also like the tone that he maintains throughout much of its length – it would have been too obvious to go the way of black comedy. *Toys* definitely isn't dark: its bright primary colors are mixed with pastels; everything we see is supergeometric, shiny, and spotless. Even the newly-enthused General gets into his role as factory owner by switching the design of his camouflage outfit over to cheerful colors.

The main reason to see *Toys* is its look. Its crystal-clear photography and innovative sets deserve to be seen in a cinema – that much was apparent to me when viewing it a second time on television and seeing how lacking in atmosphere the opening sequence looked in comparison. Its surreal visual sense (inspired by Magritte), magical setting (the only scenes outdoors take place in a ubiquitous green field), and naive, offbeat plot make for a perfect bedtime story. Likewise, its simple message – 'War is bad' – will not be lost on children. That we think the meetings of the toy executives trivial and absurd is ironic considering we think nothing of the more familiar (but equally absurd) domain of the strategic military conferences in the film. Williams combines both levels of play (toys and soldiers) in his climactic address to the factory toys, throwing in every jingoistic cliché in the books, combining Gandhi, Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Henry V, and Lord Kitchener. Rapper LL Cool J acquits himself well as the General's son. Joan Cusak gives a standout performance as Williams' quirky sister, who sums up the attitude of the film in her line "the best part is no-one got hurt".

Toys is like a big toy itself, a grab-bag of novelties and visual gags – there's a great bit where the General, under X-ray surveillance, is spouting about war as if he is Death personified. Sci-fi fans will pick up the line poached from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as the last war toy fires its final shot (I don't know how many people share this view, but contrary to film's message, I find the military toys more interesting than the boring clockwork toys that seem to be the factory's main product line). The film's memorable trailer featured Williams improvising in an open field, setting audiences up for an out-and-out comedy that they didn't get. This goes some way to explaining its lukewarm reaction at the box office.

THE TRAP (1966) 106m. There are at least half a dozen other films with this title, but this is the one in which Canadian trapper Oliver Reed shows up in town with a mind to take a wife back to his log cabin in the mountain wilderness. He buys mute Rita Tushingham for a thousand dollars, and the expected scenes of conflict and resolution ensue. The film's premise relies heavily on the convention that the audience must witness – and indeed, expect – change in the two lead characters in order to make the story worthwhile (personally, I'm not bothered by films which refuse to change or develop their protagonists). Reed, playing against a character who is mute, seems to make it his duty to act enough for the both of them, stamping through the scenery and barking in a nearly unfathomable accent. It's a very cartoony performance – by the film's end he virtually becomes Pegleg Pete – but it's obvious he's playing it broadly to give Tushingham ample material to react to.

Reed doesn't see Tushingham's muteness as a handicap, just as he fails to recognize any other quality in her besides the immediacy of her companionship. As a bearlike trapper he understands only nature, red in tooth and claw. His business and existence revolve around the hunting, trapping, and killing of animals: he is the king of the mountain, and all others, including Tushingham (who he refers to as 'rabbit') are subservient to him. It's not surprising that his surname is La Bete ('The Beast'), and indeed many parallels to the story and situation of 'Beauty and the Beast' can be drawn. The isolated wilderness might well be the far-off mysterious forests of any fairy tale. But they are the 'trap' of the title, along with the 'marriage', the snowbound cabin, the inhibitions of the characters, and of course the ever-present animal traps Reed carries with him. It is Tushingham that makes the more significant escape from these traps, but I don't believe her newly-developed independence or self-sufficiency are as important as her action to make a lifestyle choice of her own. By the film's conclusion it is not so much her decision as her confidence that matters.

The Trap's pace doesn't flag and manages many dramatic moments for a two-character piece. The exciting (though improbable) scene where Reed is being stalked by wolves could easily have been lifted from a horror movie – this isn't wholly unexpected considering Sidney Hayers was director. Composer Ron Goodwin cites this score as being his most popular with concert audiences (how could it beat out *633 Squadron*?). Reed would end up in a very similar situation twenty years later, partnered with the considerably less inhibited Amanda Donohoe in Nicolas Roeg's *Castaway*.

TREMORS (1990) 96m. Remember that game you played as a kid, when you tried to walk across, or around a room without touching the floor; or made it a mission to get from one place to another without stepping on any part of a 'forbidden' zone? That primal consciousness is, I believe, what makes this film so instantly appealing to its fans.

Kevin Bacon and Fred Ward are two jacks of all trades who own a pickup truck and little else, drifting from one job to another in the small desert town of Perfection. A visiting seismologist is, meanwhile, investigating mysterious disturbances in the ground. As it transpires, these are not caused by earthquakes but earthworms, and big ones at that. Worse, these worms are predators, which detect their prey by the vibrations of their footsteps. It doesn't take long before Bacon, Ward, and co. figure out what is going on, from which point the story becomes the struggle for survival that we've seen in countless monster movies before – with one major twist. Most movies of this type (*The Thing*, *The Birds*, *Night of the Living Dead*, et al) invariably hole up the protagonists in a restricted location, from which they defend themselves against the attacking hordes. *Tremors* turns this on its head: the characters are not confined by the walls of some makeshift sanctuary, but by the vast Nevada desert landscape itself, which they can't even set foot on. In fact, any contact with the ground is a bad move, so they end up *on* the buildings, not in them. Most of the second half of the film involves this assorted handful of characters arguing about their predicament and hopscotching from one 'safe' zone to the next.

There is no explanation for the creatures (their origins are discussed arbitrarily in one brief dialogue exchange) and they seem smaller-scale country cousins to the sandworms in *Dune* (which are also attracted by vibrations), but the film-makers never make their creations laughable, or thankfully, their characters disposable – there's no stock 'bad guy' amongst them for the scriptwriters to sacrifice to the monsters; and it's fun watching the can-do approach they take to their bizarre situation. The film's highlight for the gun crowd will be the scene in which two survivalist fanatics unload nearly their entire arsenal into one of the attacking creatures. The desert setting, drowsy and stultifying on the surface, is used to good effect, and Bacon and Ward give effortless performances that match this to 'Perfection'. Snappy pacing and canny writing make this more than just a B picture. The film's major problem was trying to sell the idea of giant earthworms as effective movie monsters. Supporting players include Michael Gross (from TV's *Family Ties*), and Ariana Richards, as a pogo-stick hopping tyke, who'd later graduate from being terrorized by giant worms to giant dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park.* Some kids have all the luck.

THE TRIAL OF BILLY JACK (1974) 170m.

Over a period of ten years writer-director-producer Tom Laughlin made four films in which he starred as 'Billy Jack', a Native American Vietnam vet and peacenik who perpetuated his message of tolerance and justice by beating the crap out of everyone who crossed him up. The Billy Jack character was introduced in *Born Losers* but hit the big time with the follow-up *Billy Jack* in 1971, when the social climate (and interest in martial arts movies) was right for Laughlin's project to become a cult favorite. But Billy Jack (both the character and the films) earned as much derision as admiration throughout the series, and by the time of *The Trial of Billy Jack*, the scales were well tipped towards the former.

The plot is standard Laughlin fare – Billy Jack comes to the defence of minorities and/or counter-cultural types who want only to live in peace and harmony – but in *Trial* it is drawn out for three hours. From his first scene Laughlin begins sermonizing, setting the pattern for the film's ongoing lectures delivered either by himself or his sidekick Jean (real-life wife Dolores Taylor), all of which could have been condensed into the five words "we are better than you". Subtlety is not in Laughlin's dictionary: his dialogues with authority figures might as well have cue cards with Boo and Hiss flashing for the audience. The downtrodden protagonists, who just want to "find their centers" either in their Freedom School or on the reservation, seem to have an act of brutality, human rights infringement, or injustice perpetrated against them at every moment, and their enemies include the army, national guard, police, courts of law, hospitals, FBI, media, politicians,

businessmen, and everyone else left over, all of whom are described throughout the film as sellouts, dungheaps, thieves, mealy-mouthed, vile, sick, diseased, et al.

By this third film in the series, Billy Jack has been promoted to mythological status (a highlight of the movie is when he punches out Jesus), appearing like some angel of retribution whenever someone is in trouble. Laughlin plays his character like an icon, distancing himself from kinship to normal human beings by maintaining a frozen muppet-like expression on his face and dressing exclusively in his trademark hat and shirt as if he'd based himself on his own action figure. The buildup to his first physical conflict, in which he plays out a cat-and-mouse tease with a couple of roughnecks to whet our anticipation of some long-awaited butt-kicking, is an embarrassing baiting of the viewing audience. To save Laughlin the effort of being tormented by the paradox of his use of violence to support a peaceful community, Taylor takes on the role of devil's advocate, reprimanding him each time he takes his boots off. A portrait of po-faced misery, all the better to enforce the seriousness of the issues in this film, she gives a no-win performance that would be unbearable if her acting was any good and laughable if it wasn't. Finally, after an hour and a half of thin-lipped sobriety, she cracks the only joke in the movie, which is so unfunny that you want to tell her that all is forgiven and she can go back into Cassandra mode without any further complaint.

I have to add that much of the acting in *Trial* is quite natural and the improvised debates are believable, but all is tainted by the condescending tone of the film, which starts bludgeoning the viewer from the opening by listing student casualties in the campus riots of the 60s and 70s and including 'Freedom School' among them, just to make sure we know there's going to be a lot of shooting so that we don't walk out before the end. Feeling that a bludgeon may be too subtle, Laughlin quickly moves to M16s and shows a Vietnam flashback with a Mai Lai style massacre of innocent villagers, which ends with an offscreen *coup de grace* to silence the last remaining baby. Feeling *that* may be too subtle, he caps it off with a child being shot while fleeing from a soldier. Is this the kind of film that shoots a kid to manipulate viewer response, you ask? No! It's the kind of film that shoots two kids, the 'nam incident simply a precursor to the climax when an innocent guitar-playing Freedom School tyke is not only (a) shot in the back, but is also (b) crippled, and (c) holding a bunny rabbit. In a movie as blatant as this, he might as well have been wearing a target on his t-shirt the first time he walked onscreen. Spoiler alert: the bunny gets away, even though I figure Laughlin was tempted to have the National Guard all turn out and start chasing it with automatic weapons, singing "Kill the wa-abbit".

Were Laughlin and his cohorts ever aware that by dealing in ideological absolutes they were inviting only a polemic as their most likely critical response? *Trial* is so dreadfully blinkered and tearfully earnest (I defy anyone not to hit the fast-forward button any time a character picks up a guitar) that it is practically begging for ridicule as a way of redressing the karmic balance. And on that note: I had no opinion of hippies before I saw this film. Now I hate 'em. They're here in every incarnation: smiling, crying, singing, belly-dancing, playing 'yoga tennis', whatever the hell that is, crying, bickering, and crying. The film concludes with an interminable version of 'Give Peace a Chance' which manages to be even worse than the one chanted by floor-slapping hippies in *The Strawberry Statement*, by which time it's clear that *The Trial of Billy Jack* is less a trial for its eponymous hero than for those who managed to watch it to the very end. Laughlin followed this up with *Billy Jack Goes to Washington*, which contained no violence, so nobody went to see it.

TUCKER: THE MAN AND HIS DREAM (1988) 110m.

This inspirational, under-appreciated biopic by Francis Ford Coppola is about as engaging as movies can get. Jeff Bridges takes the title role of Preston Tucker, a workshop tinkerer and inventor who realized there was a sizeable market for automobiles near the end of World War II, and assembled a group of friends and family to design a revolutionary new car he called the Torpedo. If 12-year old boys had money, Tucker would have made a million overnight – the Tucker Torpedo owed more to Flash Gordon than Henry Ford and has since become one of the

most collectible cult cars in the U.S. Why so prized? Because the Torpedo was itself torpedoed by dirty politics, and only fifty models made it off the factory floor.

Bridges is good at playing likeable characters and his Preston Tucker is so gosh-darn optimistic that his rightful place is in a Capra film, not the auto industry. His enthusiasm is infectious – every time an idea hits the ground running it spurs his rally cry "hold that tiger" (the Tiger Rag is a great signature tune for Tucker, though I would have preferred a wilder version than those used in the film). When a car crashes, the accident becomes a celebration of its safety specs. When the police move in for an arrest, it becomes an excuse to demonstrate how fast the car can run. Given the number of setbacks he faces, it would have been easy to tilt the movie in a way that showed a more troubled side of Tucker, as is the case with most biopics (the thinking appears to be that it can't be an accurate portrayal of the personality in question unless we're exposed to a few demons underneath). I'm glad Coppola keeps it upbeat (and, unlike many other biopics, under two hours). Shot in warm colors and featuring a swing score, *Tucker* is pretty much a 40s film made in the 90s. We don't need to see Tucker falling apart under pressure throughout the course of the film – the one moment where he flies into exasperated rage is enough to show us that he is not invulnerable beneath his beaming smile. Instead, the tone of the movie is in service to its central idea: Tucker wanted to make his dream car; Tucker made his dream car.

It's car nuts who will enjoy this film most and it probably makes their skin tingle to see Torpedoes of all colors driving triumphantly down the street in the concluding scenes (Coppola himself owns a red model). Even if you know nothing about what's under the hood, you'll still appreciate the innovations that Tucker had in mind – being a family man, he was primarily concerned with safety. And regardless of whether Tucker was making cars or light bulbs, you'll still take his side when he faces opposition by big business. In some ways it may have been a good thing that Tucker failed to break into mass production. If the name 'Tucker' had become a big automobile corporation, and no longer representative of one man, I doubt that anyone would have made a film about him. Success is interesting. Failure is even more interesting. Tucker manages both. I don't recall any other Hollywood biopics about 'The Big Three' – Ford, Chrysler or General Motors.

THE 27TH DAY (1957) 75m.

An economical, intriguing sci-fi film undercut by a ridiculous denouement, even taking into account the imaginative latitude required for its premise. Five people find themselves yanked out of their daily lives and collectively given the power of life and death over the entire planet. How they deal with this responsibility (and how others react to their power) is the crux of the story. Studio execs must have figured they were given a gift with this screenplay, which required virtually no special effects, alien costumes, or fantastic sets – if you left this to play on the TV with the sound off it's likely that you wouldn't even know it was sci-fi.

I always enjoy speculative fiction which places a group of ordinary people in an extraordinary situation as it immediately brings up the question "What would YOU do?". After *The 27th Day*'s setup there seem to be five divergent paths in response to this question, but two (maybe three) are quickly dispensed with in surprising turns, alerting us that this story is not going to be too predictable. Having said that, there is of course a love interest that develops between the two protagonists and an ultimate contest between 'good' and 'evil' (notice how it is the women in the film who spurn the warlike application of their power, leaving it to the men in the group to take up the slack). It's convenient that all of those chosen to be emissaries of life or death have clear consciences, which plays as a little corny, but at least is a less expected route than having a bunch of good guys versus one villain. Still, with all that moral fiber, I would have liked to have seen the character of The Professor made less trustworthy to add more tension to the film's final scenes.

The 27th Day capitalizes on two fears of the 1950s – the Cold War and The Bomb. I don't see that the portrayal of the former Soviet Union as enemies of the Free World makes the film outdated because to viewers of the 21st century the whole 'red menace' threat plays like a historical artefact as remote to our

everyday experience as the Crusades or the invasion of the Roman Empire. William Asher, who later became branded as the director of the Beach Party movies, plays it straight and simple, leaving blame for the sappy ending to surely fall upon John Mantley, whose showbiz connections enabled him to write the screenplay from his own novel. A modern-day remake of *The 27th Day* would have had a less Anglo-centric cast and might have ended at the point that one of the characters may or may not have unleashed their power upon the world, leaving our view of the outcome up to our judgment of that character (with the remaining reel inevitably reincarnated as an 'Alternate Ending' on the ensuing home video release). As it stands, *27th Day's* punchline is an Alien Ex Machina about as convincing as an A-Bomb that only kills people wearing pink socks. As in the worst episodes of the old *Twilight Zone* show, the script uses the then-popular SF convention of using the unknown or supernatural as a quasi-religious agent for moral choice. However, Mantley's screenplay is smart enough to keep you watching and earn your forgiveness for clunky moments along the way. And that's something, considering there would normally be no reprieve for any film that features an extra-terrestrial opening his address to the planet with "People of Earth" while describing himself with the rather blasé "I am an alien from outer space!"

TWICE UPON A TIME (1983) 77m. An inventive animated tale produced by George Lucas and directed by John Korty and Charles Swenson. The minds of sleeping Rushers (humans) are being influenced by the dream-dispensing land of Frivoli and the nightmare-inducing Murkworks. The key to their power struggle is the mainspring from the Cosmic clock, which controls all time. This fast, witty story isn't for all children, especially those who won't have patience for its unique look and flippant, incidental storyline. Visually, *Twice Upon a Time* is a combination of rainbow-hued watercolors, pen and ink, live action, and still photographs. Its endearingly scrappy look is matched by its throwaway dialogue – I can imagine this being the kind of cartoon Robert Altman might produce.

The story's hip characters provide many laughs, especially overenthusiastic superhero Rod Rescueman (James Crenna), and a nonchalant fairy godmother (Judith Kahan Kampmann). There's also the nominal lead character Ralph, a thing that looks like an extra from *Yellow Submarine* (voice actor Lorenzo Music). The film's main basis for characterization is to play against stereotype – an idea we're overly familiar with now, but don't mind in this case because the whole production has such an easygoing feel about it. The animators slip in many visual gags, mostly to do with film and television – one of the characters is an aspiring actress, another an aspiring writer, another an aspiring heroic lead. Consequently, *Twice Upon a Time* treats the manufacture of dreams and nightmares as being akin to the movie-making industry. Its most interesting visual effects occur when we see a nightmare activated in the world of the Rushers.

TWILIGHT OF THE COCKROACHES (1987) 105m. I imagine director Hiroaki Yoshida chose this title in preference to 'Day of the Cockroaches' (too apocalyptic) or 'Night of the Cockroaches' (too horrific) for this part-animated, part-live-action tale. But while 'twilight' – evocative of a closing chapter/era – is really more appropriate, it is simply wishful thinking to suggest that cockroaches have had their time on Earth.

This is one of those films that you watch and wonder why it was ever made. It's hardly box-office material: a love triangle between three cockroaches during an ongoing war – the war in this case being against two humans, the indifferent Mr Saito (Kaoru Kobayashi) and his neighbor the roach-hating Miss Momoko (Setsuko Karasumaru). Using real actors in the human roles makes it hard for us to fully identify with the animated roaches, despite Yoshida's overripe anthropomorphizing (these bugs make Jiminy Cricket look like E.T.) Furthermore, who really wants to identify with cockroaches anyway? In some cases it works: the low angle, POV floor shots; the sequence where one of the older roaches scoots among the shadows to retrieve a crumb on the floor (he does it on six legs as opposed to walking upright!). At other times it's just offputting. Being a confirmed roach-hater myself I don't find anything

cute about partying roaches hanging around a toilet or crowding around leftovers (I'll admit they're more appealing in the *Joe's Apartment* stories). Also, the storyline rambles. There's just too much to-ing and fro-ing, and at one and three-quarter hours running time the film is overlong. The film's major saving grace is that at no time the roaches burst into song (a la The Roches, perhaps?) – cartoon characters singing love songs to each other is another of my pet peeves. In fact, the simple, delicate score may be the best thing it has going for it.

It's hard to recommend this movie because its audience is unclear. Obviously, those with an interest in animation should check it out. It's probably not offbeat enough for cult status (although it surely marks the cinematic debut of a talking turd). What's interesting is that if this film had been made forty years earlier it would have undoubtedly been seen as a political statement. The comparisons with Hiroshima and Nagasaki are plain: the roaches' allies in the neighboring 'country' across the backyard have German names; civilian roaches are annihilated indiscriminately by insecticide bombs; the roach army flies into battle on suicide missions; and of course, we all know which insects will be most likely to survive a nuclear holocaust, don't we? This is a Godzilla destruction allegory pared down to insect level. It still doesn't excuse the film from being dull; the characters are largely static, uninteresting or cliched. With some judicious editing the storyline could have been tightened considerably. Forget trying to sympathize with cockroaches – watch *Creepshow* if you want to see some real roach action.

TWINS OF EVIL (1971) 87m.

As soon as it became permissible to show some skin in mainstream cinema, Hammer Studios supplemented their established reputation for horror by adding nudity to their films. Although their blood looked like red paint, the Hammer films revitalized the icons of horror cinema – Dracula, Frankenstein, The Mummy, Jekyll and Hyde, The Wolfman – in widescreen color for audiences who wanted to see their gore painted garishly onscreen and not modestly off-camera. Dracula, natch, provided the most opportunities to show blood, and, as would later become evident, eroticism. Based on Sheridan Le Fanu's novel 'Carmilla', the studios turned out what became a "tits'n'teeth" trilogy starting with *The Vampire Lovers* (generally regarded as the best of the three), continuing with *Lust for a Vampire*, and finishing with *Twins of Evil*.

You would expect the third film in the series to have even more nudity and eroticism than the previous two, but oddly it contains the least – which is even odder taking into account that the film boasts two former Playboy models. The hook for the film was the presence of 19-year old twins Mary and Madeline Collinson, but since one of them spends the entire movie fully dressed and we have to wait for over an hour for the other to let us cop a look at the real Twins of Evil, the premise doesn't live up to its potential. Having one twin in dishabille in one scene at one time is no different to the old schtick of having one actress playing twin roles against a body double or split-screen. Hammer should have adopted the adage 'four breasts are better than two', but with no exploitation to fall back on, *Twins of Evil* becomes one of the studio's minor horror efforts. Although it's not erotic, *Twins* is still fun, even if has to make do with being 'naughty' instead'.

The Collinsons are photogenic enough to be the main drawcard for this movie and they get a lot of fetching closeups, but viewers can also enjoy a fiery performance by Peter Cushing. As Gustav, a witch-hunting fanatic whose idea of a boys' night out is to scour the woods for girls to burn, he's strictly one-note until the concluding scenes. However, he brings to his role the same sense of conviction that can be seen in all of his films for the studio, and there aren't many actors that can wear a witch-hunting hat and get away with it. The precise diction of the Collinsons has been dubbed in, but it doesn't distract from their performances, and Madeline (the Evil twin – doesn't there always have to be one?) doesn't waste time nominating herself More Likely to be Turned into a Vampire. Even though time has since separated the film from its Playboy gimmick, *Twins* still has a campy feel to it. It's first evident when Cushing addresses his excitable posse, who respond with Monty Python-like outbursts of "Burn her!", and when Cushing, in a moment of clarity, makes a declaration that underlines the film's title. Other unintentional laughs come from the villainous Count

Karnstein getting agitated with news from his mute manservant that a mob of villagers with torches and pitchforks are descending upon his castle; a young peasant girl trying to outrun pursuing horsemen by using the not-very-useful strategy of sticking to a long straight road instead of ducking into the woods beside it; and Cushing berating his nieces for wearing inappropriately colored attire while no-one notices his wife standing by wearing the exact same color. *Twins* has flat-looking cinematography (by Dick Bush, and can anyone tell me why he didn't at least refer to himself as Richard to avoid oxymoronic puns?) and a score that could slot into a spaghetti western, but it does have the hallmarks of Hammer period films, with some production values shown in the sets and costumes, even if they had been recycled from previous movies. The vampire theme gets a bit muddled at first among all the witch-burning and devil-summoning, but there's enough mirrors, crosses and stakes to keep it from being altogether forgotten. Besides that, Madeline manages to look both cute *and* sexy with fangs. What red-blooded male could resist her?

THE TWONKY (1953) 84m. This curio from the 50s will be of interest to aficionados of SF fantasy. Teacher Hans Conried is given a television set by his wife to entertain him while she is out of town. As he and friend Billy Lynn rightly guess, it is a television in appearance only – it may actually be technology from another time. Part of the intrigue of Arch Oboler's film is that for most of it we are unsure of the purpose of the 'twonky', as it is christened. Is it benign or harmful? The silly appearance of the twonky (not to mention its name), the comical aspect of several of the characters, and the whimsical, twittering woodwind score establish the film as a comedy from the opening scenes (Lynn's foggy football coach would be right at home behind the bar in *Cheers*) but the same script, verbatim, could have been turned into a more sinister film if handled by a different director.

At first, *The Twonky* is a satirical swipe at television, the 'new' entertainment medium which became a significant threat to cinema in the 50s: Conried flicks through a TV guide that contains only pap; the twonky/television controls his life; he becomes housebound; his tastes are directed from 'high' art to the mediocre; and thoughts of individual expression are discouraged. And not only is television regarded as a poor substitute for cinema, it is also inferred to be an unworthy successor of radio. Read between the lines: writer-director Oboler was a prominent radio producer before switching to film, and it was he who changed the twonky (as it appeared in Henry Kuttner's short story ten years earlier) from a radiogram to a television set. Oboler develops the Kuttner story satisfactorily, although the pace flags in places, and the anti-television theme loses its way. The final scenes, however, are among the most enjoyable. Special effects are unfortunately primitive, but given their simple requirements you'd think the studio would have ponied up some extra cash to make them a little better. Ironically, *The Twonky* has a made-for-TV feel to it. With a little cropping it would have made an ideal hour-long episode for Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*, and the domestic setting, comings-and-goings of peripheral characters, and gag ending follow standard sitcom conventions. It was dismissed with their usual smirking by the Medved Brothers in the 'Golden Turkey' books – maybe they were running short of material.

2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (1968) 141m.

Stanley Kubrick's groundbreaking science-fiction film not only dominates 'Best SF Films' polls, but also gets top spots on 'Best Movies of All Time' collections, too. In the few decades between *2001*'s release date and the year of its title we have seen volumes devoted its analysis and appreciation; every angle has been explored and exhausted, leaving only the most desperately ridiculous of extrapolations untouched. There's little left to say that's new, other than to note what makes the film either a different or similar experience to its first appearance 33 years from the turn of the millennium.

Firstly, there is the accuracy (or not) of its forecasting: it was obviously a bold move in 1968 to predict giant space stations and passenger spacecraft, none of which have come true in the dimensions that the film presents them (although *2001* was the year that saw the first civilian paying for a trip into space and the retirement of the Mir space station) but ironically it is the smaller details that now appear the

most dated. For example, there is no telecommunications monopoly by the Bell Telephone Company; BBC television has not expanded to the extent that it has 12 channels; a telephone call from space would certainly not cost a paltry $1.75; and the suit worn by that photographer in the conference room is just plain awful (we didn't suddenly lose our fashion sense after the 20th century). However, it is the size of HAL, the supercomputer in charge of running the spaceship 'Discovery', that a number of viewers find the most dated element of the film. I've never understood the basis of this criticism, though I imagine that our familiarity with microprocessors, PCs and laptops have convinced us that large computer databanks are obsolete. I don't disagree with the fact that storage alone takes considerably less space in the actual year 2001, but a computer system the size of a room isn't entirely unbelievable – just look at the amount of hardware packed around a special effects studio, for instance. To say nothing of the amount that might be required for an interplanetary space voyager.

There is also the issue of clichés: one thing that makes me nervous about going to 21st-century screenings of *2001* is the potentially risible reaction of audiences to scenes which have become so well-known that they have been imitated, paid homage to, and parodied beyond count. I usually forewarn any friends seeing the film that they may think "Oh, not this corny music" within its opening ten seconds, but to also bear in mind that *2001* was the film that established this, and many other science-fiction film conventions, when it was first released. I'm relieved that audiences are usually sophisticated enough nowadays to recognize *2001* as being the point of origin for many of these motifs (although it's likely that they are comprised mostly of appreciative repeat viewers). Elements of the film that have become a standard part of much SF cinema include its prologue set in prehistoric times, the presentation of an alien intelligence as a godlike being, the all-powerful computer that can't be trusted, the trippy special effects blowout in the film's final act, and even the image of a large spaceship traveling across the frame of the film until we become awed at the size of it.

As films became ever faster and louder, another notable difference in viewing it years later is the amount of silence in the film: *2001* is just as visually astonishing as when it first appeared, but for a different reason. Among a barrage of contemporary films which manage to look impressive through use of computer imagery, tricks, stunts, kinetic camerawork and wild editing, *2001* is possibly more unique now than back in 1968. There is no other film that sustains so many diverse silent, or at least wordless passages throughout its running time. In my experience, audiences too become silent which make the events on screen even more compelling or meditative. It also portrays space in a way that I've never seen before or since (one critic of the time stated that *2001* wasn't about space travel, but *was* space travel). More than any other SF film it presents space as a vacuum – a cold, vast, dark, silent, airless eternity. Seeing men reduced to tiny specks in their spacecraft, journeying beyond the comparative safety of the mothership, makes the universe appear a lonely and frightening place indeed.

With many science fiction films of the past, the most dated element is always the special effects, many of which now appear downright naïve or laughable to contemporary viewers. However, the quality of *2001*'s effects – one of the primary reasons for its enormous cult – has not diminished any over the years. I still consider Douglas Trumbull's innovative FX work superior to that of *Star Wars*, released nine years later. It's interesting that while Kubrick was confident enough to burn all his props and blueprints (stating that his finished film was indeed the definitive final word on the matter), George Lucas felt the need to refine and update the visuals in his *Star Wars* trilogy before delivering the newest film of the series in 1999.

Finally, and as is the case with many 'classic' films, there is something to be gained in iconography: watching the film today there is almost a delight in recognizing or revisiting images that have become indelibly stamped into our cultural psyche. To see HAL's red eye, Moonwatcher raising his bone aloft like a weapon, the giant space wheel spinning above the moon, the featureless black monolith, the distinctive designs of the space vehicles, the Star Child staring enigmatically at the Earth, the jump cut from the Dawn of Man to the Space Age, or the brilliant psychedelic colors of the journey through

the Star Gate (you owe it to yourself to see the best quality print you can), is to witness truly classic moments in cinema. Viewing it now is almost like watching some grand historical document in motion.
2001's appeal is not purely about the look of the film. Its storyline, which abandons any notions of a central character, and has no time for contrived plot colorings such as romance or heroism, still remains unique; and because it is unique it still looks 'new'. *2001*'s matter-of-fact handling of its narrative, its audacious concept, precise delivery, multitude of themes, enquiring philosophy and Zen-like sensibility make this one of the masterpieces of cinema.

U TURN (1997) 125m. There's nothing all that new about *U Turn*, another of those crime thrillers set in a quirky jerkwater town populated with eccentrics. It was the closest to a genre picture that director Oliver Stone had produced in a long while, and he obviously enjoyed the change of pace (no significant 'An Oliver Stone Film' in the credits of this pic; rather he makes sure we realize it is 'An Oliver Stone Movie'). Homage, throwback, send-up, revision, call it what you will, but by the end of the 90s even the subversion of these genres had become old hat.
If there is a reason to see it, it's because Stone directed it. It's interesting to see how he works in the domain of film noir: for starters, he uses high-contrast photography to turn it into film blanche; otherwise, the usual ingredients – the murder plot, the bag full of money, the femme fatale, the double-crossing, and the low-rent locations – are all there for us to enjoy. From these elements you could make up your own plot which would be fair stab at approximating *U Turn*'s actual synopsis: Sean Penn breaks down in a small Arizona town, gets involved with all the wrong people, and ends up being a patsy in a murder. Penn has no easy role to play, but his performance strikes the right chord – even though we are uncertain about how he can deal with the tailspin that traps him, his refusal to cave in gives us some confidence that he will prevail (hey, the guy survived a marriage with Madonna, right?). In fact, all of the performances from Stone's motley cast are a delight – Penn's encounters with mechanic Billy Bob Thornton and town punk Joaquin Phoenix are hilarious, and the leading players appear to enjoy delivering the seediness Stone wants from them. This includes the town as a character in itself, a wonderland of peeling paint, parched weatherboards and rusting cars, which all know better than anyone else what is going on around those sultry streets. Everywhere there are murals, posters, signs, slogans, books, photographs, and billboards, all contributing a subliminal sentience to the backdrop. Neither is it any safer outside the town: Stone throws in several intercuts of animals that revisit the spirit bonding and desert epiphanies he seems so fond of in his films (*The Doors, Natural Born Killers*). All of nature seems to be on the game: if the town doesn't kill you, the desert will.
U Turn marks another excursion into violence for Stone, but he justifies it this time around by dint of the prerequisite perversities of classic noir. I certainly don't regard it as smug as Tarantino's own brand of violence, although personally I found the wilful damage to the paintwork on a Ford Mustang more distressing than any of the trauma inflicted upon human characters in the movie. Once again Stone collaborates with cinematographer Robert Richardson (this is one of the longest partnerings of director and cinematographer in cinema), and utilizes the flashy editing and switching between different grades of film stock which became a trademark of theirs in the 90s. If you want to see *U Turn* precisely for Stone's individual stamp on the work, you probably won't be disappointed. That doesn't mean it wouldn't be a bad idea for Stone to give different reasons why people should see his films. I ran out of reasons for seeing Tarantino's after his third 'Mexican Standoff' finale in a row.

ULZANA'S RAID (1972) 103m. Robert Aldrich directed this western which finds Burt Lancaster in philosophical mood as McIntosh, a scout hired by the cavalry to track down a renegade Apache chief who has left an Arizona reservation to

go on the rampage with a small band of followers. As is usual with these movies, Lancaster knows the terrain and the Indians better than any other man around. As is also usual, he has an inexperienced young lieutenant (Bruce Davison) to 'educate' along the way, but who isn't as feckless as we might assume (actually, he holds up pretty well considering the violence he is witness to). It doesn't helpe that Lancaster can't reply to anything Davison says without making a snappy remark, leaving the young officer to work things out for himself most of the time.

Contrary to what you might expect from the genre, conversations between characters are thoughtful and clear. Davison can't help comparing Apache values with Christian ones in his attempt to understand Ulzana's way of thinking – or is he trying to rationalize it? Most revealing is Ulzana's excuse for his attacks on the scattered settlers. It is not simply a case of exacting revenge for white colonization of his land. Rather, he equates the reservation with impotence – he wants to possess and assimilate the spiritual power of those outside it. It's up to Lancaster, Davison, and their cavalry troop to second-guess Ulzana's every move and stop him before he kills again – it's the kind of storyline that suits a cop-vs-serial-killer formula better than a western. There's also enough tension and gore to make it effective enough as a horror movie (an ambush scene early in the story has an unexpected, shocking moment). Bearing in mind the year of production, *Ulzana's Raid* can be interpreted either as yet-another-Vietnam parable (Ulzana's band are as nameless and hidden as the Viet Cong), or a call-to-arms to preserve the identity of Native Americans, which were then seen politically as a growing part of the counter-cultural revolution. But you'll enjoy it more if you view it simply as a western – which is probably what Aldrich intended all along.

UNDERCOVER BLUES (1993) 93m. This straightforward spy comedy runs on one gag but gets a lot of mileage out of it. Not unexpectedly, it does run out of gas before the end, but there are plenty of bright spots along the way. The title refers simultaneously to undercover cops and, more irritatingly, to the surname of husband-and-wife team Jeff and Jane (Dennis Quaid and Kathleen Turner). What it definitely does not refer to are any 'blues' suffered by agents feeling down about their job, because it is the free and easy manner projected by Quaid and Turner that provides this film with its heart.

Their holiday in New Orleans interrupted by a plea to return to service and extradite a visiting terrorist, the Blues wander recklessly through one confrontation after another, seemingly improvising the investigation as they go. The central gag: this 'normal' married couple are trained undercover agents, and in the manner of a long cinematic history of secret agents, manage to turn the tables on every unsuspecting foe they cross. It's been done before, but this time it's different. Cast your mind back to every other spy film you've seen (barring the more outlandish, surreal spoofs) and you'll know that no matter how infallible the protagonist appears to be, there will always be a moment of reckoning. It makes screenwriting sense – if the character is invulnerable, there can be no element of suspense. *Undercover Blues* throws that rule right out of the window: the reason it is so enjoyable is precisely because we have absolute confidence in these two characters. Quaid, with his huge aw-shucks grin, is completely insouciant as he walks into one bad situation after another; Turner's sense of fun is barely concealed throughout her performance. The reason why this approach works in *Undercover Blues* where it would fail in other films is because of a third element – the Blue's baby. Wherever Quaid and Turner go, the baby accompanies them: it's a prop to show us that nothing bad is going to happen, that the comedy isn't going to turn sour with a dubious 'serious' scene or random act of violence. It's not until the film's climax that it there is one moment where the Blue's savior-faire may be about to come undone, but it is so fleeting that we've barely time to doubt them.

The investigation element of the story follows an unhurried, meandering track that blends in with both the New Orleans setting (which otherwise is never exploited) and the holiday mood that Quaid and Turner refuse to abandon despite their reassignment. Their juggling of babysitters, sightseeing, and 'business' make the act of espionage as ordinary as the lives of the married couple they befriend in their

hotel. It's inevitable that this incidental treatment of the story's motive might turn off some viewers, but it's a logical approach when weighed against the mood *Undercover Blues* is aiming for. To add a little spark, Stanley Tucci gives a hilarious performance as a small-time crook ("My name is Death!") pursuing a hopeless vendetta against the couple. He'd all but steal the show if Quaid and Turner weren't so perfectly congenial as his adversaries. Larry Miller features as a local undercover cop in awe of the Blues, and Obba Babatunde is his less-than-impressed partner. Favorite scene: Quaid's confrontation with Tucci at the zoo.

UNTIL THE END OF THE WORLD (1991) 179m. Wim Wenders must have considered this his dream film (literally, as the story turns out). His earlier road movies (*Alice in the Cities; Kings of the Road; Paris, Texas*) and preoccupation with transient, questing characters finally came to a head with *Until the End of the World*, a road movie that travels all over the planet, no less.

The year is 1999, "the year the Indian satellite went out of control", so we are told, and Claire (Solveig Dommartin), a free-willed young woman, is given the opportunity of a lifetime when she lucks into a cache of stolen money. At almost the same time she meets an enigmatic stranger (William Hurt) who steals a small amount of her find, and so begins their global game of hide-and-seek as Claire uses the rest of her money to chase him from continent to continent. This chase, which drags in others (not the least of whom is Sam Neill, Claire's former lover), seems to be the thrust of the film until about halfway through when it abruptly stops in the Australian outback (the end of the world?), changes gear, and introduces a secondary cast and a new story. Suddenly Dommartin, Hurt, Neill, and others are involved with Max Von Sydow's (Hurt's father) experiments to digitally reconstruct images from the neo-cortex.

Opinions will be divided among many over which half of the film is better – or at least more enjoyable – but for some *World* will be just too much: too long, too big and too slow. At the outset, the material looks tailor-made for a whimsical fantasy (who wouldn't like to chase someone clear across the globe?) but Wenders has a curiously practical approach. It's also hard to get a handle on Dommartin's character because her motivation for hunting down Hurt is unclear. Is it obsession? Romance? The thrill of the chase? Or does she look upon her actions as the last expression of freedom and spontaneity (her character is established as capricious right from the start) beneath the decaying orbit of the satellite that hangs above her head like a Damocletian sword? Whatever the reason, she and Hurt do not make a terribly convincing couple – like others in the cast, they are almost swamped by the scale of events Wenders places them in. State of the art technology (as it was projected to be in 1999) is in every scene, and an impressive soundtrack of original songs, specially commissioned by Wenders, plays constantly throughout the first half of the film.

Until the End of the World is a grand game all of Wenders' own, but we enjoy watching him shuffle the pieces because he never loses sight of the humanity of the characters – witness the poignant scene in which Hurt interviews his sister and her daughter. And a final shot, capturing the meditative wonder in Claire's face, is truly special, causing one to reappraise the title of the film. Despite epic aspirations it's not a film to get serious about and find fault with – you'd do better to let Wenders indulge himself and take you along for the ride. Naturally, with scale as large as this, it is best enjoyed on a big screen. The four-and-a-half-hour director's cut (with approximately 40% more nudity, 70% more aboriginal culture and 80% more jam sessions) is probably more suitable for its fan following than novice viewers as their patience may wear thin from the film's uneven tempo – in this version the weight on the outback part of story makes the international chase seem like a preface.

VALENTINO (1977) 128m. This typically

raucous Ken Russell biography is a bit of an odd one out in his catalogue. I'm not sure why he was attracted to the story of silent-movie idol Rudolph Valentino after several years of tackling composers and artists, but I would guess that the allure of recreating the old days of Hollywood is a pretty potent lure for any film director in love with his craft. Despite flaws, and its liberal interpretation of the facts, *Valentino* at least introduces the man to those casual viewers that may have never heard of him. At best, it implants the image of Rudolph Valentino as a screen phenomenon of the silent era and points out the distinctive impact the film medium had back then. It's summed up quite simply in one shot that shows an audience composed entirely of women watching a Valentino film while the camera moves in on one and transports her into the events on the screen. Russell, however, is not one for understatement – to compensate for the lack of filmic events that take place in Valentino's life he inflates scenes with loud music and hysterical, obnoxious characters. Given the right subject matter, Russell's excessive style can be effective (*Altered States, The Devils, The Boy Friend, Tommy*). Here, it's just puzzling – at least for any viewer unacquainted with the notorious director.

Cast as the central character is ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev, who shares not only his forename with the screen idol but a workable physical likeness. Aware that this was Nureyev's acting debut, Russell wanted him to speak more with body language than words, but the dancer saw this as a chance to develop an acting career (which ironically paralleled Valentino's own artistic progress). At times he is striking in the part, particularly when he is on the dance floor. He also alternates between wooden and hammy, but that conforms to our stereotype of silent film actors anyway and isn't necessarily a distraction. The interesting cast also includes Leslie Caron, Felicity Kendal, Carol Kane, Michelle Phillips (from The Mamas and the Papas) and John Ratzenberger in a bit part. And where on Earth did Russell dig up Huntz Hall?

By the film's end we are still left with the impression of Valentino as an icon, not a man. It's a curious thing, which we might like to blame on the story, Nureyev's performance, or Russell's handling of the material. But I think the answer is simpler than that: Valentino was and always will be an icon because although we know him by sight we have never heard him speak, henceforth freezing him in time exclusively by image. He also died young, reinforcing that this image would never develop, grow old, or change. Valentino the man was transformed into the smoldering characters he presented on screen. Could any biographical picture have transcended that legacy? What attracted Russell to the project – Valentino's legend – is also the same thing that ensured his film would never be entirely successful.

VIRUS (1980) 155m. Another import bites the dust: as was their custom with many a foreign film, U.S. distributors chopped up this Japanese end-of-the-world epic and served it to audiences with nearly 45 minutes missing. What makes no sense in this instance is that the producers had patently intended the film to be Western-friendly by employing an international cast (Glenn Ford, Robert Vaughn, George Kennedy, Olivia Hussey and several others) and having most of the dialogue spoken in English, mostly to the detriment of the Japanese actors who were reciting their lines phonically. It wasn't until the next millennium when movie fans had access to home cinema systems that *Virus* (along with a back catalog of other butchered, censored and re-edited foreign films) was able to be enjoyed in its original form.

The world has been ravaged by pandemics several times in films and books and their storylines generally detail the accounts of survivors rebuilding communities in the face of adversity, but author Sakyo Komatsu takes no prisoners in his version: the virus HH88 is airborne and no-one is immune. It quite simply kills every living thing it comes in contact with. Komatsu, who has always had a thing about grand scale destruction (from an entire country in *Japan Sinks* to an entire planet in *Bye Bye Jupiter*) forces us to accept something unimaginable – that without compromise the virus will extinguish practically all life on Earth. From the outset we're aware that the sum total of human beings left on the planet amount to 863 people stationed on research bases in Antarctica, a fact that affects our viewing of

the first half of the film, as we know that everyone we see will die, and worse, that they have no knowledge of this themselves. It's chilling to see a nurse escort a doctor away from a room of doomed civilians into another room full of doomed medical staff – the nurse, who in any other scenario we might think of as a surviving heroine, is just as disposable in this film as a background extra, and the next time we see her she is steering a power boat into the oblivion of the ocean. It's a haunting moment which leaves the final details of death to our imagination, fittingly echoing the situation experienced by the survivors on the research base, who know nothing about their loved ones or exactly what is happening in the outside world. Unfortunately, to emphasize this point, director Kinji Fukasaku inserts a clumsy scene in which a group of Antarctic survivors listen to a five-year-old boy (that is to say, a voice actor unconvincingly portraying a five-year-old boy) operating a ham radio, who delivers a speech to the empty airwaves concluding with the declaration "I don't want to be alone!", upon which he abruptly shoots himself dead without even taking his finger off the transmission button. Other unintentional laughs come from the bizarre casting of Chuck Connors as a British submarine captain (his sole attempt at sounding British is to say 'chaps' a few times) and the rostered "distribution" of the few women on the Antarctic base, who are outnumbered by the men by about forty to one. This in itself is an intriguing plot development and a provocative debate topic, but suffers from an unfortunate cut to 'One Year Later' with a row of women contentedly cradling babies in their laps.

The only way to see *Virus* is in its complete form and on the biggest screen available (the photography of the opening credits alone is worth setting up a projector, and there's not a special effects shot to be seen). At two and a half hours it still might not seem as 'big' as it should, but there's no short way to document the end of the world and even serialized television scenarios don't waste much time in getting the actual apocalypse out of the way so that they can concentrate instead on the aftermath and all those interesting character dynamics it brings out. I find *Virus* balances the disaster and its consequences more evenly than any other film of this type that I can think of. It's a story of such tragic, inevitable decline that we almost become skeptical of anything that might turn out right. The ending, epic and primal, features a lone survivor spending four years walking the distance of half a planet, north to south – it would be a far-fetched notion if some rendezvous point hadn't been agreed on beforehand, but a plausible enough rationale in the circumstances: if you were the only survivor of an apocalypse, would you sit still or undergo a quest to give yourself a sense of purpose and an element of hope?

VISIONS OF LIGHT (1992) 92m. This superlative collection of movie scenes and interviews with cinematographers was directed by Arnold Glassman, Todd McCarthy, and Stuart Samuels, and won the 1993 Oscar for Best Documentary. While it may seem a little nepotistic of the film industry to give an award to a documentary about the film industry, it is in this case well deserved. The stars of the show are the directors of photography who have contributed to movies over the last hundred years. *Visions of Light* reads like a Who's Who of cinematographers: Nestor Almendros, Vilmos Zsigmond, James Wong Howe, and Gordon Willis are among the cast list all enthusing and reminiscing about the images they and others have created.

Visions of Light traces the evolution of cinema chronologically, but what makes it unique is seeing developments such as the advent of sound and color exclusively through the eyes of the cinematographers (although I find it odd that the invention of new lenses is never acknowledged at any time). The DPs come across as a closely-knit club – it's fun hearing them talk about their work and admiration for their contemporaries, friends, and heroes. As one captivating film sequence follows another you'll feel you are at their sides, flipping through a family album of cinematic treasures. How could anyone not want to rush out and see all of these films on a big screen afterwards?

Films of every genre and era are ably represented, and what's admirable is that there are few of the usual 'classic' scenes that always appear in films of this type (one exception is the crane shot of the wounded in *Gone With the Wind*). *Visions of Light* wisely emphasizes the feeling of discovery –

unexpected or forgotten moments of film are unearthed and rediscovered from start to finish. You won't be anticipating segments from *Rosemary's Baby* or *In Cold Blood*. Other works like *Sunrise* and *McCabe and Mrs Miller* are impossible to ignore. It packs a lot in for its 90 minutes. You may have some fun with friends later discussing what was left out (personally, I'd like to know why *Barry Lyndon*'s breakthrough photography-by-candlepower wasn't included). A must for anyone seriously interested in cinema.

WADD: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOHN C. HOLMES (1998) 110m. A commendably objective documentary which takes a frank look at the turbulent life of 70s-80s porn star John Holmes. The film-makers obviously figured that this subject matter alone was going to earn their movie an R rating so they allow their interview subjects free rein on opinions and reminiscences – this doco has the highest frequency for 'penis' synonyms in the first ten minutes than any other film you will have seen. It's only to be expected: Holmes' claim to fame was 13 inches of talent (32.5 cm if you prefer metric), a fact that director Cass Paley recognizes as this movie's selling point. The audience gets what it pays for (although the famous member itself is only glimpsed) with much made of the fact that Holmes was born for porn, but this is merely a starting point – there's a lot more than sex going on in this story.

Holmes' odyssey leads him from a hard upbringing in Ohio, a stint in the signal corps, and marriage in California. After an introduction to the LA pornography market and the invention of private dick 'Johnny Wadd' (the script was written on the back of an envelope!), his career path is assured, and the rest should be simple. Holmes has a fatal flaw, however: he is a pathological liar, whose endless evasions and fabrications become so habitual that he begins to experience some sort of slippage. After being busted on pimping charges (along with others stuck with "conspiracy to commit oral copulation"), Holmes turns informant for the LAPD vice squad – effectively he is living out his own porn-detective alter ego. He graduates from smoking joints to freebasing cocaine, blurring lines of reality even further. By the time he's stealing cars while on the run from the FBI, the cops, *and* the mob, Holmes' separation from everything and everyone in his life has become complete. *Wadd* is terribly confusing: no other documentary has been so replete with contradiction. The most common adjectives used by interviewees to describe Holmes are 'gentle' and 'sweet' – yet this is the same man who caused the horrific murders of four people and wantonly continued having sex with women without informing them that he was HIV positive. Nearly everyone gushes about what a great guy he was, but who's kidding who? By the end of the film you won't trust what anyone has to say except for his second wife who has at least suffered enough physically to make her testimony believable. Just to bring everything full circle, Holmes' third wife (and porn star) Misty Dawn sued the film-makers a year after *Wadd*'s release for slander and "reckless disregard for the truth".

Much more than just a documentary on a titillating subject, *Wadd* is equal doses of humor, poignancy, horror and fascination. Many lines are quotable, but not subject for repetition in most review columns and as the star player is Holmes himself, several innocent sentences take on amusing innuendoes – my favorite is when his first wife talks of his carpentry skills, claiming he 'could make anything with wood'. Among those interviewed: Ron Jeremy, Gloria Leonard, Kitten Natividad and Misty Dawn a.k.a. Laurie Holmes, who now maintains the official John Holmes website. The film also includes non-explicit clips from various Holmes movies, including the Johnny Wadd series. Its musical score is suitably cheesy and could be recycled in spots as background for any real porno movie.

WAR OF THE WORLDS (2005) 116m.

Perhaps the scariest thing about Orson Welles' Halloween prank in 1938, which found Americans

frightened out of their wits by a radio presentation of 'The War of the Worlds' in the guise of a breaking news story, was the number of people who failed to correlate the events of the broadcast with the plot of H. G. Wells' novel. Was it as early as the 30s that people stopped reading and started digesting their culture from radio and movies? When George Pal made his film version in 1953, it was no doubt perceived as 'the film of the radio show' as much as 'the film of the book', and when in turn Jeff Wayne produced his popular concept album in 1978 it had likely evolved for many consumers into 'the musical version of the movie we saw on TV as kids'. With Steven Spielberg's 2005 remake (or re-imagining, as the buzzworders would prefer to have it) Wells may have all but been forgotten by the general viewing public. I wouldn't be surprised if this version of the novel has backtracked in popular perception to 'the movie of the musical album'.

All of which leaves some viewers ill-prepared to handle *War of the Worlds*' changes of direction, abrupt ending, and hokey closing declaration, all of which have already been laid out in the original story. Bringing together two of his long-running leitmotifs – War and Aliens – Spielberg has delivered exactly what he set out to make: a kick-ass space invader movie. Surprisingly, Wells' retro-looking alien machines make effective marauders in this update. You don't think a walking tripod can be scary? Compare them to the gliding manta rays in the Pal version and then see who gets your vote. It makes sense that an airborne assault would be a much more practical way to invade a planet, as flying saucers and spacecraft from other movies would testify, but practicality is not a major concern in *War of the Worlds*, which is a visceral movie, not cerebral. There is a primal fear in being stalked, and it's this that Spielberg taps into. The tripod machines manage to be both mechanical and biological, marching along the countryside like armor-plated jellyfish while tiny figures scatter for their lives. It brings back our worst childhood nightmares – is it any wonder that one of the central characters is a terrified child? – of being chased by something we cannot comprehend. Doubly scary when that incomprehensible horror has erupted from the ground where it has been lurking beneath our feet.

Spielberg cranks up the energy level early on, and creates persuasive scenes of panic by keeping the perspective at ground zero – comparisons with the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center are inevitable – but then the story makes the bold (although realistic) decision to have its characters go to ground. From this point the movie becomes a different nightmare (dread, rather than terror), winning no favors from viewers expecting more scenes of chaos and destruction. But this is one of the best things about *War of the Worlds*: that the story shift is in accordance with the behavior of its protagonist. As everyman Ray Ferrier, Tom Cruise is no hero, nor should he be. He doesn't know exactly what to do when he's running, and is just as lost when he's hiding – a personality trait that draws criticism from not only his kids but also a total stranger that strikes up an alliance with him. It's entirely fitting that he doesn't try to take on the Martians and lead some rag-tag rebel force against the machines – as readers of the novel know, the aliens are defeated not by humans but by a major oversight in their invasion plan, rendering any action by Cruise's character irrelevant anyway. His is a much simpler mission, for a simpler man – to reach Boston and reunite his kids with their mother.

Cruise and Dakota Fanning (as his daughter) create convincing, believable characters and achieve the remarkable feat of not being dwarfed by the special effects, but being a part of them. As would be expected from a Spielberg production, these effects are sensational, and if his other films promote the idea of watching movies in cinemas then *War of the Worlds* makes a strong case for hearing them in cinemas too – we've all seen death rays before, but you can almost sense the air ionizing around every harsh discharge of these fearsome weapons. The ear-blasting soundtrack of thunder and lightning, buildings splintering apart, and ground violently upheaving is just as startling as the visuals. This is light years apart from Spielberg's other alien visitations in *E.T.* and *Close Encounters* and there's an irony in the fact that those feel-good space visitors were inspired somewhat by the director's reaction to the timid-looking Martian creature that was briefly glimpsed in the Pal version of the story. At the time, he thought it was vulnerable and sorta cute. Since

then he'd obviously decided it was time for the Martians to have a makeover and do what space invaders do best: scare people and blow stuff up real good.

WHAT DREAMS MAY COME (1998) 113m. It's terribly frustrating to have read a book that no-one else you know has. As it stands, I know but one other person who has read Richard Matheson's life-after-death novel "What Dreams May Come", and that's only because I made her read it myself. After the film version hit the screen, I found myself at another level of frustration: that the film and the book were not quite the same thing, and I was right back where I started from, unable to share the experience.

Matheson's intensively-researched novel is captivating because it takes subject matter that is dangerously new-agey, pseudo-religious, or just plain gooey, and turns it into something that manages to be thoughtful and somehow authentic. Obviously, such metaphysics lend themselves to the printed page more readily than the cinema, which is why I had never entertained the idea that this book would ever be made into a film. Obviously NZ director Vincent Ward thought otherwise. Since Ward had a history of powerful visual imagery, showed himself to be an intelligent, discerning film-maker, and walked out on his first Hollywood assignment (*Alien 3*) as soon as it departed from his original concept, producers obviously figured him to be a suitable choice to handle Matheson's difficult book. He probably got as close to it as anybody else could.

What Dreams May Come is titled after Hamlet's famous soliloquy about death, so it should not come as much of a surprise when Chris Neilsen (Robin Williams) shuffles off his mortal coil ten minutes into the story and eventually finds his way to an afterlife created by visual cues from the memories of those who inhabit it. There is no judgment in this world, no heaven or hell save their simulacra. For a while we share Chris' exploration of his new world, and it is as blissful as any you could imagine; but, as David Byrne says, heaven is a place where nothing ever happens, so it isn't too long before Chris is going further afield (read: hell) to reconcile himself with his dead wife Annie (Annabella Sciorra).

The first half of Ward's film depicts a heaven-world so beautifully realized that it's almost as if he and his crew went there to get location footage. It is like nothing else you've ever seen on film. For a while the vivid colors and intricate detail make this a spectacle which can be seen only on a large canvas. But then something peculiar happens – as the story shifts from heaven-world to hell-world, the visuals become less impressive. Furthermore, just at the point where Chris is finally taking action and doing something, the story gets piled up with flashbacks that interrupt the narrative and prevent his quest from becoming the epic it deserves. Given the impressionistic, painterly world of 'Summerland' (as Matheson refers to it), it's only natural to expect Hell to be influenced by the works of Bosch, Hogarth, or even Gustave Dore. Initially, the journey is promising (I like the way that Chris and Annie's initial boating encounter is perverted into a shoreline of wrecked vessels) but in the end Hell becomes gloomy and run-down, and Ward shoots most of the sequences there with Williams and Sciorra in close-up so that we don't even really get to see a lot of it. This may all be a dubious strategy on his part – just as the devil gets all the good lines, it is easy for a dramatic, chaotic hell to upstage a meditative, placid heaven. Ward's solution, therefore, is to make Hell boring. After ten minutes we're pining for the wide open spaces of Summerland again, which is where everyone in this story belongs, and of course, ends up.

What Dreams May Come is a difficult film to gauge – you don't want to be unfair to it because it does manage to take you places you haven't seen before in the movies. Yet the journey may just be too careful, too measured, and too contemplative for its own good, which is why it is not for all tastes (although anybody who is genuinely interested in film should check it out for its cinematic qualities alone). Also, for a non-religious afterlife there seems to be an excess of guilt around, which gets a little wearying. And even after Chris gets everything he wants, he still wants to get back to the 'real' world. It's just as Schopenhauer has always said: satisfaction in human beings is impossible, because whenever one desire is fulfilled, ten others jump in their place; and even if they were all fulfilled, satisfaction would only

become boredom. I guess we all know this deep inside, which is why the final scene doesn't seem as corny as it otherwise might (the last line is really sweet, in a karmic kinda way).

I appreciate the intelligence behind this film and the bold way it is set almost entirely in the afterlife, and ultimately it does not do the book a disservice (as for visualizations of hell, it still doesn't beat a Strontium Dog comic I read serialized in *2000 A.D.* when I was a teenager), and I suppose I should be satisfied with that: yes, it takes us into Hamlet's 'undiscovered country', and quite convincingly. So if you liked the movie, read the novel. And if you didn't like the movie...well, read it anyway.

WHAT'S UP, TIGER LILY? (1966) 80m.

Woody Allen's early experiment in comedy laid the groundwork for *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and the improvised soundtrack dubbings on the UK TV series *Whose Line is it Anyway?* – consequently it doesn't appear nearly so unique nowadays. We've probably all talked over the top of a movie on TV and added our own soundtrack or commentary (a group of friends and I managed to invent a most amusing pornographic narrative for *Battlestar Galactica* one time), but Allen realizes the idea wholly. By taking a serious Japanese thriller, *Kagi No Kag*, and re-editing it with new, irrelevant comic dialogue, Allen came up with a new way of getting a product into cinemas with relatively little expense. If *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (titled to cash in on the previous year's *What's New, Pussycat?*) helped get his future projects off the ground, then its addition to the Allen oeuvre is more than justified. Fortunately, it has the distinction of also being funny.

Consider the way Allen was to approach his task: he obviously had to keep a cohesive narrative throughout his film without sacrificing humor to exposition. To this end, he employs a motif – a recipe for egg salad – that becomes the justification of all that happens in the film. Having set up a running gag, the jokes in *Tiger Lily* then take on two forms – they either bear some relevance to the events happening onscreen, or they are totally off-the-wall (e.g. one early exchange has a young half-dressed beauty approach the film's hero, only to deliver the line "Name three presidents"). It's the latter humor that is most characteristic of the Woody Allen we know from magazine articles, where his wild, offbeat lines are truly hilarious. Perhaps *Tiger Lily* is most reflective of this writing style because, like a magazine piece, it allows Allen distance from the project – he appears not as an actor (or even voice) but as an observer. It's a curious attitude, because after this project Allen's films were to become more and more intertwined with his life and persona. Watching *Tiger Lily* today, one can't help think of his self-critiquing *Stardust Memories*, in which characters complain that he is no longer interested in making the "early funny stuff". I hope Allen does not disown this film, as so many maturing artists do of their fledging work – it may lack the sophistication of his later films, but there is still "funny stuff" at hand here (I find the 'Hollywood impressions' sequence hysterical). It's surprising how well the absurd dialogue actually synchs up with the actors in the original film! Some filler is provided with inserts of 60s group The Lovin' Spoonful – they don't add anything to the story.

WHISPER OF THE HEART (1995) 111m.

There's a cheery sequence midway through *Whisper of the Heart* when a group of characters spontaneously perform the whole of John Denver's 'Take Me Home, Country Roads'. Film-makers have been throwing in these singalong scenes as an easy form of nostalgic manipulation since the '80s, so you may be justified in assuming that there wouldn't be anything different or special about it this time around. After all, a survey of the film's synopsis reveals a fairly standard story: two Japanese final-year junior high students, Shizuku and Seiji, discover each other through a series of coincidences and become friends who come to realize they love each other. This sounds like too many other films that you've either already seen or never bothered to watch, but the difference here is that the production house responsible for this movie is Studio Ghibli, which, for the uninitiated, means that *Whisper of the Heart* is a completely animated version of what is essentially a live-action script.

It's not as if Japanese animation, which has different sensibilities to that of the West, rarely grounds itself in 'real life' scenarios (there's certainly no shortage

of porn in the genre); it's just that in *Whisper* the animation process is not used as exploitatively as you might expect. Granted, there are some fantasy scenes where Shizuku is visualizing a story she is writing, but otherwise the script is heavy on dialogue and has almost no action; the budding romance is handled sensitively and intelligently; the characters restrain themselves from melodramatics, don't try to appeal to us by being too cute, and aren't put through the usual clichéd rigmarole of attraction / misunderstanding / fight / separation / reconciliation. Most significantly, the animation is not manipulated as a means to appeal to our emotions, and even though *Whisper* is based on a popular shoujo manga (girls' comic) by Aoi Hiiragi, it's the very unlikeliness of such a story being told through the means of animation that makes this film such a pleasure.

Studio Ghibli is the leader of the pack in its field – their collective artists, writers and directors share a common vision that enables them to produce work of quality. *Whisper* was adapted and produced by Ghibli's elder statesman Hayao Miyazaki and was to be the only film directed by his assistant Yoshifumi Kondo, who died a few years later. As is typical of many of the Studio's films, it is full of incidental details and minutiae to bring a smile to fans of the genre – the brief, understated scene in which Shizuku's friends sight-read lyrics to a Western pop song may strike a familiar chord with anyone who has ever been in a Japanese high school. The backstory about an antique store owner's lost love is effective because in animation all characters are created equally (i.e. they are all drawn, therefore inhabit the same plane) so that it becomes possible for us to care just as much about two porcelain figurines as the surrounding human characters. Shizuku and Seiji's banter is realistic throughout but is rather jarringly abandoned for needless declarations in the film's final minute (Hiiragi would write a sequel that picked up the lives of Shizuku and Seiji two years later). Still, that's only one minute out of 111, and this sweet, gentle story will easily capture the hearts of those who are both romantics and animation buffs. The Denver song is used effectively as the film's signature tune – you'll know you're in for something different from the opening titles. As with other Ghibli/Miyazaki films, it's worth sticking around until the very end, as the final credits reveal the resolution of one of the story's minor subplots.

WHISTLE DOWN THE WIND (1961) 99m.

After being snapped up by Disney for the role of Pollyanna in her second film, Hayley Mills returned to the girl-meets-outlaw theme of her debut, *Tiger Bay*. The twist is that she and her younger brother and sister believe the mysterious arrival of a stranger (Alan Bates) in their barn to be nothing less than the Second Coming. Their active, young imaginations, coupled with the rural isolation of the Northern Country serve to make such a fanciful idea believably down-to-earth. Hayley and her siblings (Diane Holgate and Alan Barnes, who give effortless, "real" performances), who know little about Christ, ironically develop faith and a sense of responsibility as soon as they meet him in the flesh, so to speak.

Whistle Down the Wind speaks volumes about the way children rearrange facts to fit in with their own interpretation of the world. Their straightforward reasoning has no time for awkward questions (e.g., they bring 'Christ' bread and wine because "that's what he eats"). But who can blame their approach when their token religious instruction is just as vague? When one of the children worries about his kitten, his Sunday school teacher unhelpfully remarks that 'Jesus will look after it'; when Mills tries to get a straight answer about Christ from the local priest he uses it as an excuse to complain about vandalism. Appropriately, the convict (he has a name, as published by the police, but is referred to only as "The Man" in the closing credits) responds to the children with equal simplicity. He rarely speaks a sentence more than a few words long. Bates remains reticent throughout the story – we can never be sure of his intentions. He neither 'reforms' from contact with the children, nor betrays them to use them as some kind of leverage when things start looking bad.

Although the children find 'Jesus' in a barn, and then skip away to the accompaniment of a Christmas carol, we are otherwise spared any coy allegorical commentary. *Whistle Down the Wind* is charming, not pretentious. It is so gentle that even a slap across the face stands out as a violent moment. Mills and the other children will completely win you over – you'll

remember the touching final moment. Bryan Forbes directed from a story by Mary Hayley Bell (Hayley's mother). Composer Malcolm Arnold arranged the cheerful score. The film's title refers to a hawking expression, more commonly known in its figurative sense of abandoning a person or thing.

WHITE DOG (1982) 90m. When Julia Sawyer (Kristy McNichol) adopts a stray arctic-white German shepherd she has no idea that it is a trained attack dog. Worse, it has been trained to attack – and kill – anyone with black skin. This examination of racial prejudice by uncompromising director Sam Fuller sat on the shelf at Paramount for ten years because it was considered too racially sensitive for general release and was not shown in U.S. cinemas until it received retrospective festival screenings. It's a shame, because in *White Dog* Fuller is able to relocate his familiar themes of discrimination and combat into a more intimate and recognizable setting – the transformation of a living being into a killing machine is just as vivid here as in any of his numerous war movies. The story's key line comes, appropriately enough, from Keys (Paul Winfield), the black animal trainer bent on rehabilitating the dog, when he says "Dogs see only in black and white". He is of course speaking metaphorically for the narrow perspectives of all humanity. While McNichol is sickened and wants the animal destroyed, Winfield instead makes it his mission to reform it, as if he is curing not just one dog, but triumphing over the unreasoning animal nature of all men (or the bigoted ones, at least). He in effect turns the dog into *his* metaphor. Fuller perpetuates this in one attack scene with a shot of a stained glass window depicting St Francis (though he looks more like Christ) standing over a white dog while we hear the sounds of McNichol's dog savaging a black man to death out of frame. It's a cynical, distressing moment that is creepily identical to the pseudo-religious 'white is right' doctrine of the Ku Klux Klan.

The use of a dog as the villain is problematical because we are kept aware throughout the story that it is not acting of its own free will. We feel the same ambivalence towards it as the other characters do, but by the picture's end you'll feel sorry for the dog, who is in obvious mental torment, and angry at irresponsible owners who make this sort of behavior happen. The dog itself is fearsomely convincing. Its human co-stars, Winfield and Burl Ives, are well suited to their roles, but it's McNichol who gives the most appealing performance. Fuller makes the most of her vulnerable-yet-determined looks by shooting her frequently in close-up. There's irony in her role as a woman putting her pet through extensive therapy when we remember that shortly after this film she herself suffered years of (well-publicized) anxiety attacks. Fuller and fellow director Curtis Hanson wrote the screenplay, based on a story by Romain Gary. Ennio Morricone provided the superb, rather poetic score.

WHITE HUNTER, BLACK HEART (1990) 110m. A film based on a book based on a film based on a book. Or, to be more precise: Clint Eastwood's film of Peter Viertel's roman-a-clef about John Huston's film of C. S. Forester's novel 'The African Queen'. Huston's production was quite an ordeal. His cast and crew shot on location in the Belgian Congo; their steamboat sank in the river; filming was delayed by rain; and nearly everyone contracted malaria or dysentery. Eastwood/Viertel's retelling instead chooses to focus on Huston's ambition to shoot a wild elephant. Was his prime motivation for travelling to Africa to enchance his film's authenticity or to pick up a hunting permit for a few hundred dollars and go on safari? It's the latter argument that drives Eastwood's monomaniacal director John Wilson, who doesn't care about his creditors, his producers, his audience, or even possibly his film. He appears to be the worst type of character to let be in charge of a film on location. But Wilson manages to persuade everyone to let him have his due – he is funny, cynical, gruff, opinionated, and articulate. You can see how Eastwood was attracted to this role, particularly in the scenes when he cuts someone down to size with one of his caustic monologues. His performance, whether it is based on Huston or not (let's face it, a cigar-chewing, gravel-voiced director isn't exactly a stretch for Eastwood), dominates everything on screen.

Eastwood/Wilson keeps himself at a far remove from any other characters and it is only through his

peer/mentor relationship with the more responsible screenwriter Pete (Jeff Fahey) that we see him at his most approachable. Pete provides the voice of Wilson's conscience, i.e. the voice he does not listen to. But it's clear that Wilson is calling the shots, even in Pete's domain: early in the film Wilson writes the lead characters out of his script by killing them at the story's conclusion because as a film 'god' it is his right to do so. We naturally expect the same reasoning behind his killing of an animal, a notion Pete (who sees elephants as timeless beings) balks at. If a godlike human is superior to his human contemporaries does that also confer him superiority over a godlike animal? The answer to this question is where the film seems to be heading from the outset. We do at least see a change in Wilson's demeanor at the conclusion – upon one character's utterance of the film's title, it looks as if he has finally been struck by a grim revelation. It's ironic that Wilson, given to lengthy invectives against his travelling companions, is brought down to earth by nothing more than four words. He is on the receiving end of his own advice to Peter: strip away all complications and keep it simple. Eastwood's film itself is also deceptively simple – it ranks among his very best. Unfortunately, the public, more used to seeing Eastwood as a hero with a gun and not an anti-hero with a gun, largely ignored it upon release. Catch it if you can.

THE WILBY CONSPIRACY (1975) 102m.

Not the best-known film in the careers of Michael Caine and Sidney Poitier, but certainly worth catching. Don't let the homogeneous Robert Ludlum-like title put you off – *The Wilby Conspiracy* is an adventure yarn with enough odd flourishes to earn itself a cult audience. Caine is a British mining engineer vacationing in Cape Town who meets his new lawyer girlfriend (Prunella Gee) for lunch and ends up on the run to Johannesburg with one of her clients (Poitier), a black activist newly released from several years in jail. It looks like some serious exchanges about politics, South Africa, and apartheid are being set up to take place between Caine and the handcuffed Poitier, (*The Defiant Ones* springs to mind fairly quickly), but you'll have to watch Richard Attenborough's *Cry Freedom* if you prefer your chase movies to have a more political bent. *The Wilby Conspiracy* raises many provocative issues in its opening scenes and then leaves them to ferment as background material. All we have to know about Caine and Poitier's escapade is that it is politically motivated – the specifics aren't necessary.

The best thing about *The Wilby Conspiracy* is the wry, lurking humor displayed in its snappy dialogue and unusual asides (my favorite is when Poitier visits a fellow conspirator who runs a dental practice while Caine pretends to watch a movie in Hindi). Throw in former Miss India Persis Khambatta and a very youthful Rutger Hauer piloting his own plane, and how can you resist? But there's more: the film is stolen by Nicol Williamson's laid-back performance as a chain-smoking government security officer who seems to occupy a South Africa all of his own, stramming about the countryside and remarking "All righty" whenever he's ready to move on. The characters and cast alone could probably carry this movie, but the storyline is also engaging. It splits easily into thirds, each section presenting the protagonists with a problem to solve, i.e. a flight from the authorities, an operation to retrieve some diamonds, and a plan to cross the border. It's worth noting that this story would have been handled differently if filmed twenty years later – the fairly difficult but straightforward trials faced by the characters would have become over-elaborate and ultimately unrealistic set pieces replete with stunts. The simplicity of *The Wilby Conspiracy* is what gives it its charm, but more importantly it places the protagonists' goals within their reach, preventing it from becoming entirely unbelievable. *The Wilby Conspiracy* is also a lot easier to enjoy now that the business of apartheid has been dispensed with in South Africa – it's probably just as well the story downplayed this element to begin with. Because of the touchy subject matter, director Ralph Nelson filmed on location in Kenya instead of South Africa. Jack-of-all-trades Rod Amateau (a former producer, stuntman, actor and sitcom director) wrote the script, based on Harold Nebenzal's novel.

WONDERWALL (1968) 75m. This 60s 'head' movie flopped when it opened in theaters and would have vanished into obscurity had it not been for the

instrumental soundtrack by George Harrison which kept it known for several years (a re-edited version, including a restored opening track by Harrison, was released in cinemas three decades later). In keeping with the Beatles connections, Dutch design group The Fool (who also painted the wondrous wall on the Apple Boutique building) was hired to create artwork and fashions for the film. *Wonderwall* also has writer Gerard Brach (a longtime favorite of Polanski) and actress/singer Jane Birkin on board to help it earn cult status.

Jack MacGowran stars as a mousy professor (coincidentally, he had played a professor in Polanski's/Brach's *The Fearless Vampire Killers* the previous year) who analyzes water samples and lives in a cramped apartment which looks like it is made up mostly of walls. The monotony of his daily routine changes when he discovers a small hole through which he can peer into the apartment (a great set!) of neighbor Birkin. The images he sees intrigue him and soon all his time is spent watching the room next door. *Wonderwall* is less concerned with a story than it is about an event, and observes it with as much detachment as MacGowran studies the bacteria under his microscope. The characters are as two-dimensional as the wall that separates them, their only purpose being to play out the film-makers' ideas. But if this is so, then what is the idea being conveyed in *Wonderwall*, if any? Is it that old 60s saw that we all build barriers around ourselves that need to be broken to attain total freedom? Does it suggest that drugs can enlighten one's consciousness? (one character, who appears in a fantasy sequence as 'LSD' is quite happy to discover that MacGowran has sugar cubes he can borrow). I don't think filmgoers need to dig for a message to endorse *Wonderwall* – it's enough that the film was pretty much overlooked in the era it was made and the cultural capital invested in it years later reclaimed it iconographically. In other words, the main reason to see *Wonderwall* 'now' is because it is a film that could only have been made 'then'.

That's the extent of my affection for *Wonderwall*, but I would have preferred to see the film go further than it does. Why not let MacGowran demolish the wall with a vengeance so he can launch himself into the alternate universe he sees behind it? In spite of its trippy feel, the basis of the storyline is surprisingly conservative. MacGowran's visions look like photo shoots, which don't seem out of place when you remember that Birkin's character is a fashion model. In fact, the whole thing is more than likely hallucination on his behalf. Even something like a small hole in a wall becomes an avenue of escape from his dingy apartment – through it he hears music, inhales dope and entertains all manner of fantasies. The early *Psycho* reference (stuffed birds, the appearance of 'Mother", and a guilty MacGowran crouched at the peephole spying on a girl) serves little point unless it's meant to tip us off that MacGowran is unhinged from the outset. Interestingly, because what MacGowran sees is fanciful we don't think of him as a voyeur. And besides, we don't really see him getting any gratification – at the end of the film he's just where he was at the beginning, making the whole exercise seem pointless. I think, however, that like any scientist (quantum physicists excluded) MacGowran's character knows that to achieve true results he is permitted only to observe, and nothing more. At the point in the story when he finally stops viewing and starts interfering, the consequences are significant. In short, he has broken a precept that has been fundamental to his work routine – in fact, his life – and that is enough to create some form of liberation, even if it is one that can't be seen outwardly. It might not be our idea of a happy ending, but it's good enough for him.

YELLOW SUBMARINE (1968) 90m. One-of-a-kind animated fantasy by the Beatles – well not exactly: they contributed the music, but the story and voice acting was done without their involvement. The animated Fab Four are asked to help save Pepperland, a musical paradise, from occupation by

the music-hating Blue Meanies. It's a magical world, and so can be reached only by magical means, viz. the submarine of the title. Consider the year of the production, the recently released 'Sgt Pepper' album's flirtation with the drug culture, and the basic concept of a dimension-traveling submarine, and you'll see why the "trip" takes up most of the story. The submarine image dominates the film's psychedelic world so comfortably that you may forget that it was originally derived from a children's song. The Beatles may have suspected this juvenile treatment for the cartoon early on, which explains why one of their songs written specifically for the movie was a children's chant ('All Together Now'). While it's great to see animated sequences to classic Beatle songs – like prototypical music video clips – it's the newer material that synthesizes best with the look that the film-makers were striving for. 'Only A Northern Song' and 'It's All Too Much' point the way to *Submarine*'s potentially wilder side; and while the script throws in 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' the rest of the Beatles extant catalogue just doesn't have the 'acid' sensibility to promote a complete head trip.

It's probably a good thing, however. Nothing dates more badly than an era, and while *Yellow Submarine* is recognizably the product of the late 60s it is not dependent on it. There are the prerequisite acknowledgements to flowers, butterflies, and love but the movie is saturated with so much visual innovation and wall-to-wall puns that it could just as easily be a contemporary construct paying a postmodern homage to the era (in fact *Yellow Submarine* has already been emulated in video clips by Michael Jackson and Oasis). The entertainment value of the film is probably unquestionable if you're a Beatles fan, or an animation fan, or ideally both. Children raised on cartoon slapstick and rocket-paced visuals may be a little bewildered by the film's reliance of wit over action, but it'll do them good. Adults will find more to enjoy in the script's many conundrums and wordplay, a lot of which refers to Beatles lyrics. The story starts to wind down near the end – the Chief Blue Meanie gets really tiresome – but at least you know it's all bound to finish with a song. It's a credit to the art direction by Heinz Edelmann that this feature has retained its entirely distinctive look decades later. The soundtrack was digitally overhauled on the film's 30th anniversary and re-introduced in cinemas to stunning effect – now awash in an ocean of huge, crystal-clear sound, *Submarine*'s voyage is truly complete.

A ZED & TWO NOUGHTS (1985) 115m.

Twin brothers with the surname 'Deuce', whose first names begin with 'O' – effectively, "two noughts" – strike up a relationship with one Alba Bewick (i.e. 'white car'), the driver of a white car hit by a swan (a white bird) outside a zoo of black and white animals on Swan's Way, whom we can designate by default as the 'zed' of the title (nought being the beginning of a sequence [numerical], zed being the end [alphabetical], in a film that begins with death and concludes with birth – along with another death that recreates a conjoined condition at birth), said zoo being of course a 'zed and two noughts' (the symbol O having both numerical and alphabetical signifiers) and which backwards reads 'ooz' (ooze), which is to quote one of the brothers the state where life begins and ends...

I was working in a zoo at the time I started connecting the dots in Peter Greenaway's film when I saw it at a Film Festival, a reference which the director would have no doubt approved of as it adds to the conspiracy of symmetry prevalent throughout *Zed*. This guy is not only a love-him-or-hate-him film-maker (director Alan Parker once said he'd leave the country if Greenaway was allowed to make another film in the UK) but a film-maker who you might not even be sure if you do love or hate. If you're not automatically repelled by Greenaway's subject matter or approach (both are inextricably connected) you may find yourself watching his films a second or third time...perhaps to sift through the things you didn't cotton on to in the first viewing, or simply to find out what your opinion of the film should have been.

It’s possible to write about *Zed* without mentioning anything specific in the film at all, ruminating instead about Greenaway himself, who is so watermarked throughout every frame of his work that it’s little wonder that people such as Parker forget about resenting the film and resent the film-maker instead. Certainly there are common threads running through his body of work – *Zed* is yet another exercise in cataloguing, another elaborate death ritual, and another story inhabited with fixation. But in just the same way that we can watch the same Shakespearian plays performed over and over again because of the subtleties of variation and interpretation, Greenaway fans will watch the director performing his arabesques just to enjoy seeing which new motifs have caught his interest. In *Zed*, he crosspollinates all kinds of metaphors and symbols for no other apparent purpose than for us to discover the links ourselves. The characters in *Zed* aren't particularly likeable, the escalation of different levels of decay filmed in time-lapse may be either revolting or sneakily amusing, the conversations are abstractions of personal agendas, and the behavior of people to each other (and animals) is callous. All that’s left to actually enjoy is Michael Nyman’s score (and if you don't like minimalism then that's a washout, too) Sacha Vierny’s cinematography, and Greenaway's Rococo conceits of art direction (wot, no tableaux this time?).

Zed is not for any viewer expecting a conventional experience of cinema, but it’s not so abstruse that it becomes inaccessibly avant-garde or arty either (for comparison, I cite the *Cremaster* cycle, which reminds me of Greenaway at half-speed and is not nearly so enjoyable). Without characters, setting, or a storyline that we can relate to, Greenaway may be accused of making movies for the kinds of people who do crossword puzzles (or read books by Julian Barnes, who would pass as Greenaway’s literary twin if anyone could) instead of making movies purely for entertainment or perhaps even as some contribution to the forum of cinema as art. As much as Greenaway does disturb or irritate me sometimes, I can still appreciate the fact that he is committing his own peculiar visions to celluloid for no other reason that he can. His work is still being seen and discussed, enough perhaps to suggest that Greenaway’s films are not ultimately about themselves or their director, but about the people that will keep watching them…and wondering why.

2. Capsules

(1950s-70s Z-grade, indies, nudies, roughies, exploitation)

The Adventures of Lucky Pierre (1961) 70m

The leaden hand of Herschell Gordon Lewis pretty much takes all the comedy out of this series of vignettes that recount the escapades of 'Lucky' (he keeps throwing snake eyes) Pierre, who spends the film stumbling upon young women taking their clothes off. As it's the same women each time, the voyeurism factor is quite well exhausted after an hour. They're not exactly pulchritudinous, either. Gags are drawn-out and laboured, but let's face it, who was watching this for the jokes? Some good moments in a Drive-In near the film's end. Filmed without sound (except for the opening sequence), making it reminiscent of Russ Meyer's early nudies. Made in four days by Lewis and producer/partner Dave Friedman. What took them so long?

Alice in Acidland (1968) 67m

'This is no fairy tale,' we are warned. Well, neither was the original *Alice*, but who involved in this movie would know? All-American Girl is introduced to orgies and drugs at a Hollywood pool party via her French teacher (those damned continentals contributing to the downfall of our youth, as usual). She immediately becomes a "wild and provocative twi-night hippie", and even worse, "complete with the Indian beads and moccasins". Film is nothing more than a dull nudie grope-a-thon with occasional stern narration telling us how immoral it all is, and would be easily dismissed among others in the genre if it weren't for the inclusion of an LSD sequence in the final reel. Alice takes a sugar cube and the film switches to colour, providing a 15-minute trip of the cheapest kind (maybe the film-makers had been inspired by *2001* that year) which is all superimpositions, coloured lights, and pulsating oil wheels, after which the narrator declares our heroine "a mental vegetable". Ironically it's probably only effective in simulating an LSD trip if you're already on acid while you're watching it.

The Amazing Love Secret (1971) 60m

This "factual documentary dramatization" by Dennis van Zak has dated terribly – the main reason to see it now, of course. It's shameless exploitation despite Zak's attempts to disguise it as shameless propaganda. Premise of film could be done justice in five minutes: it posits marijuana as a powerful aphrodisiac. Zak demonstrates this 'amazing' fact repeatedly by showing toke-smokers getting turned on and having sex. Memorable scenes include a laughable voice-over by porno king John Holmes (it's funnier if you don't know who he is) who undergoes a sexual revelation with his secretary; a ridiculous, transparent, and blatantly suspect 'group therapy session' in which everyone immediately strips off and starts groping each other; another ridiculous voice-over with a girl describing all the candy she wasn't allowed to eat as a child (she's getting it on with a black man at the time); and a husband who turns his frigid new wife into a love machine by drugging her with hash cookies. Zak obviously reckoned he couldn't miss with this sex-and-drugs combo. A few vox pops are included to remind us it's supposed to be a documentary.

The Amazing Transplant (1971) 80m

Doris Wishman's film starts off sleazy and ends up kinky, but mostly it's pretty dull. Mary and Arthur want to get married – until Arthur suddenly flips his lid and strangles an ex-girlfriend, dampening her enthusiasm somewhat. He goes in hiding, while his uncle interviews friends and neighbours in search of him. Most of the film is made up of flashbacks depicting Art's frequent sexual assaults (which are accompanied most inappropriately by light jazz).

Stay tuned however for the film's most (unintentionally) hilarious line, when Arthur demands his doctor to perform surgery on him. The sound recording obviously didn't turn out in the final scene where Arthur explains the whole story, which is why he does most of his talking with both hands over his mouth. And where does Wishman find these consistently awful apartments? There's even one with a moose head on the wall!

Another Day, Another Man (1966) 70m

Exploitation director Doris Wishman in her fake morality phase. Barbi Kemp and Tony Gregory are a married couple that finally get to move in to the apartment they've always wanted. Because of a complete lack of dramatic incident, Gregory suddenly keels over in mid-piano recital. Kemp decides that the only way she can pay her hubby's medical bills is by turning tricks for her girlfriend's pimp. Usual Wishman motifs prevail: characters with monosyllabic names, body stockings, and big hair. As everyone spends most of the film sitting around in apartments badly dubbed you could almost think you were watching a foreign 'art' film.

The Astro-Zombies (1968) 78m

Ted V. Mikels pie that takes forever to get started. The CIA has been experimenting with brainwave-transfer experiments; rogue scientist John Carradine is using this research to create – no, not just zombies – *astro*-zombies ("Prepare him for brain transfer and total astro-mobilization!"); Tura Satana is the enemy agent out to steal the research data. Because the monsters of the title have hardly any screen time this is less a monster movie than a spy thriller. Pity, because the idea behind the battery-powered zombies isn't bad. They're upstaged anyway by Satana, who commands attention in every scene – she looks like she just timewarped in from the old Saturday serials.

Attack of the Killer Tomatoes (1980) 87m

Good title, or at least it was back in the early 80s before such campiness became *de rigueur*. Spoof follows general monster-movie formula: monsters attack, people die, scientists find way to destroy monster. Except for one king tom at the end, the tomatoes are conventionally sized and attack their victims by leaping on them and...er...making squishy noises. Several jokes fall flat. Surprisingly this film hasn't developed a *Rocky Horror* style participation audience armed with tomatoes to throw at the screen for every dud joke, although it does have a cult (and has spawned sequels and a cartoon series). Most memorable images: tomatoes attacking a swimmer (a la *Jaws*), a tomato wearing headphones, and a helicopter which makes a clumsy landing – as it turned out, this was a genuine pilot error. Audiences laughed at the time, believing it to be the only decent stunt in the film.

Barbed Wire Dolls (1975) 90m

Jess Franco sleaze treads the well-worn girls-in-prison path, but is a lot more graphic and less spirited than the features from the U.S. Lina Romay, who would suffer indignities in many a Franco film, is the innocent-girl-behind-bars, who is stripped naked and electrocuted, molested, etc, etc, along with her fellow prisoners, until the expected escape attempt. Plenty of explicit close-ups but less sexual couplings than you'd expect. Yes, the treatment of women is offensive, but the whole thing is so dumb, the plot so standard, and the characters so cliched, that there's no realistic context to connect it to. Franco didn't have the means or budget to film a flashback scene in slow motion, so he has the two actors play it all out at half speed! The muzzles of guns are kept offscreen when they're fired and the sounds of shots are dubbed in. The abrupt ending of the film is either original or pointless, depending on how you feel.

The Beast That Killed Women (1965) 60m

Another nudie flick by Barry Mahon, of the 'point the camera and shoot' school of directing. Husband and Wife nudists (who sleep in separate beds and wear pajamas) take a trip to the ol' nudist colony to work on wife's tan line. Worried that perhaps audiences might be bored watching the usual T & A, Mahon throws a gorilla into the mix as an excuse for a plot. Some excuse. Some nudist camp. The two main activities appear to be walking back and forth aimlessly or sitting on the bunks and complaining. There is also, however, the horror of nude square dancing. Everyone carries a towel or wears shorts. Hubby gets attacked by gorilla and is questioned by

police. “I first thought it was someone in a monkey suit,” he says astutely. Even by Z-grade standards, the performances are abysmal – these actors wouldn’t even get into a Herschell Gordon Lewis movie.

Beyond the Law (1968) 84m

Norman Mailer, who exploded onto the literary scene at the age of 25 with the chutzpah to write a debut novel 700 pages long about World War II, displays the same self-assurance here as a film-maker with this rambling account of one day in two police officers’ lives. It begins with the two cops hoping to pick up some “classy ladies” by telling them the story of their day (this sequence, which involves interrogating suspects in a lineup, takes up the bulk of the film) and finishes with their lieutenant, played with purple-prosey gusto by Norm himself, muscling in on their date and giving his own take on interpersonal relationships. Given Mailer’s credentials as a writer, you would think that this would be a carefully structured affair, but the acting and camerawork are meant to impress as improvised. It’s like watching the same note being pounded over again for a while, as the cops (one played by Mickey Knox – sound familiar to *Natural Born Killers* fans?) shake down one “freak” after another. Presumably Mailer doesn’t have a high opinion of the police force: note that many of the suspects are in minority groups – black, Hispanic, hippies, gay – which makes the officers’ intensive grilling of them seem motivated more by ignorance, prejudice, or sadism rather than justice. Despite looking like it was all thrown together in a weekend, some of the performances/dialogues are engrossingly believable – especially a D.A. telling a cop that he’s been handed a bum rap, and one suspect’s indignation of being picked up on a solicitation charge.

Big Meat Eater (1982) 82m

Offbeat shoestring production was made in Canada by Chris Windsor. Pint-sized aliens land in a small town requiring fuel for their spaceship (the film makes no apology for the fact that they look like toys). They find it in the local butcher’s sewage tank. Film is like an elaborate home-movie, with some humour and musical interludes. George Dawson, as the butcher, bops along to catchy opening tune, which states “he’s the butcher, not the hero”.

Bilitis (1977) 95m

David Hamilton, a photographer best known for his fuzzy photographs of nude young girls, turns his hand to film-making. Result: fuzzy film of nude young girls. 24-year old Patti D’Arbanville, who had already worked with cult directors Andy Warhol and Frank Perry, plays title role of schoolgirl in the South of France who is confused about her awakening sexuality. She finds some solace with one of her school chums, an older woman, and a local boy. Too pretty and ‘careful’ to be genuinely erotic, although the opening scenes show some promise: schoolgirls bicycle through forest roads accompanied by sunny Francis Lai score, then frolic in the water. Leisurely pace and simplistic storyline don’t make Hamilton’s debut anything special – he may have opted for this approach to downplay voyeuristic aspect of his work.

The Black Klansman (1965) 87m

Made at a time when the civil rights movement was a force to be reckoned with, this is probably Ted V. Mikels’ best film. Jerry (Richard Gilden) visits a small Alabama town to infiltrate the chapter of the Klan that was responsible for his daughter’s death. The twist: Jerry is able to pass for white despite being part black. A good part of the story however is spent on the efforts of his girlfriend (Rima Kutner) to track him down. Production is a throwback to social dramas of the 50s but is well-made and intelligently scripted – it could easily pass as the product of a major studio. It may remind you of the similarly-themed *Storm Warning*. Curiously, Mikels didn’t pursue this avenue of film-making– instead he next made *The Astro-Zombies*! Klan’s robes look more expensive than most others you’ve seen on film. Best line from the Klan leader, as his followers take to the hills: “You can’t leave me! I’m the Exalted Cyclops!”

Blacksnake! (1973) 82m

If you didn’t know this was an independent production you’d think that some big studio was taking an awful chance. Russ Meyer’s beautifully photographed, wide-screen period epic is more

histrionic than historic. David Warbeck arrives on a Caribbean cane plantation to work for Anouska Hempel, but also to investigate the disappearance of his brother. The black canecutters are more than merely exploited – they're brutalized beyond reason. Tone of film captures the essence of those hideous sex'n'soap historical pulps perfectly – the characters are only caricatures. It's clear that Meyer wanted to make Hempel the most monstrous female of his films to date just so he could be justified in giving her a horrific death. His habit of tossing in flash-forward clips during the credits is very annoying: you've been given the outline of the film in the first three minutes.

Blast of Silence (1961) 77m

Two-man show by Allen Barron (writer, director, star) and Merrill Brody (producer, cinematographer) demonstrates just how to make a good indie film. Frankie Bono (Barron) is a troubled hit man who is supposed to bump off a small-time gangster but gets caught up in the loneliness of New York at Christmastime. This is distracting for him as he needs to work himself into a state of hatred for his victims before he can pull the trigger. Film takes the bleak soul-searching usually displayed in cinema by alcoholics or businessmen trapped in a daily grind and transplants it into the world of the hired killer. Slow, grey mood is enhanced by no-frills NY locations which alternate between crowded rooms/bars/sidewalks, and long, empty streets. The point seems to be that Frankie is alone wherever he is: the final scene takes place in miserable, desolate swampland. Barron looks the part of the hit man. Acting is of a high standard all around. The jazzy score is great, too. Unusual use of second-person narrative helps add to film's unique nature.

The Blast-Off Girls (1967) 83m

Herschell Gordon Lewis pic about the trials and tribulations of a rock'n'roll band called The Big Blast with the usual groupies, deceptive managers, etc. The Blast-Off girls are the escorts required to entertain prospective investors, thereby adding the required exploitation element to the story. Scenes drag on forever; musical numbers are filmed in one shot (synching different camera angles in post-production would have been too taxing). Acting is uniformly awful. The band itself isn't too bad. Surprising appearance by Colonel Sanders (Sanders and Lewis – two great icons of the South together!). Blatant product placement ensues. 'Wacky' Beatles-style montage at end fails to attract band any new followers. Lewis, who has no gift for comedy, made five other films in the same year.

Blaze Starr Goes Wild (1960) 75m

"Blaze, listen," says the heroine's agent moments into the first scene, "A photograph must talk. It should say something." Was this the sum acting direction that Doris Wishman gave Starr for this nudie pic? Stripper Starr had already gained notoriety for being the lover of Louisiana governor Earl Long (their story was filmed as *Blaze* with Paul Newman and Lolita Davidovich) and become one of the few 'names' to feature in the nudie-cuties of the 60s. Starr stars as a movie star who is tired of the demands of her agent (who looks like he has an eyebrow where his moustache should be) and so escapes to the simple life at a nearby nudist colony (naked chess, naked archery, naked standing around the clothesline and talking, etc). As Starr's attributes easily upstage those of the other gals, it takes only moments for her to attract the attention of the camp director, the only clothed nudist in the camp, who eventually wins her charms with some naked accordion playing. With typical Wishman economy, the interplay of their first date is dispensed with in one shot (Enter Characters. HE: Will you have dinner with me tonight? SHE: Well, I don't know. HE: I understand. SHE: I'm sorry. HE: That's all right, let's go. Exit characters). Fans of the director will no doubt rejoice to see plenty of trademark post-synched dialogue scenes being filmed with the camera fixed on one character while the other speaks offscreen. We also get to see Blaze walk from her front door, down her front path, and to her car not once but three times. It would be just another Florida sunbathing club film were it not for the presence of Starr, who pulled in audiences eager for an eyeful of what the Governor had been seeing the last couple of years.

Blood Feast (1963) 70m

This low-budget, badly acted, badly filmed sleaze by Herschell Gordon Lewis is famous for being the first

of his 'gore' films. For all intents and purposes, the first of anyone's gore films, in the U.S. at least: Lewis realized that this avenue of exploitation was a gold mine after a few attempts at sex comedies. Only reason to watch it – and it's not much of one – is to see young women bloodily dispatched by fanatic Mal Arnold, who is collecting body bits for a sacrificial Egyptian feast. It would be more offensive if the effects weren't so primitive (e.g. the whipping scene, where the lash leaves red marks on the victim's back and anything else it touches). Lewis needs practice with tilts and zooms. He also contributed the "original thematic music", a lifeless pairing of timpani and soap opera organ. Cinema release was a sensation upon first showing, but also alerted censorship and distribution bodies to loopholes regarding the portrayal of graphic violence. It does have a cult of supporters, but really, they should know better.

Blood Freak (1971) 72m

Christian splatter movie. With rugged hair and Elvis glasses, "burly" Steve Hawkes (who also co-directed and co-produced) meets two sisters at a party, one a God-fearing Christian (named Angel!) and the other a dope-smoking heathen. Since catechism is as close as Angel can get to foreplay he decides to get stoned with her sis instead. It only takes three puffs. To further upset his body chemistry he is invited by scientists to eat a turkey that has been fed on an experimental diet "to see if it's safe for humans to eat" (the kind of no-nonsense approach that the FDA could learn a thing or two from). There's a lot more plot, but in precis: Hawkes has epileptic fit; grows pop-eyed turkey head; murders a succession of young girls and drinks their blood; tries to go Cold Turkey; provides strong moral message of film that drugs are bad and that the path to salvation is through the Lord. Since God liked to do a lot of smiting in His time He probably would have approved of the many scenes in which people get their throats cut and legs sawn off. The acting is among the most wooden ever committed to film – you can see the actors petrifying into forests before your very eyes. Central turkey motif is entirely appropriate.

Blood Orgy of the She Devils (1973) 69m

Hypnosis, witchcraft, channelling, human sacrifice, psychometry, reincarnation, jungle drums...what is this movie actually about? Ted V. Mikels film about a modern-day coven of witches suffers from a muddled storyline, and the 'blood orgy' isn't nearly bloody or orgiastic enough to compensate. Girl takes her boyfriend along to a seance; he is skeptical and alerts a parapsychologist. Scientist-vs-occultist showdown consists of scientists pointing their hands dramatically at the house and unleashing psychic energy. What were the occultists doing, quantitative analysis samples? Mikels' contention seems to be that it's OK for witches to summon Satan because people were so rotten to them centuries earlier. Satan's agent wouldn't allow him to appear in a movie like this one, anyhow. To save money, Mikels filmed on location in his house. Yes, that weird building is his house! Film reunites Tom Pace and Leslie McRae from Mikels' earlier pic *Girl in Gold Boots.*

Boin-n-g (1963) 63m

Borin-n-ng! Just the film to put on the TV if you want visitors to leave. After a few nudie films, director Herschell Gordon Lewis and producer Dave Friedman decided to make a film about themselves making a nudie film. It was probably a good idea at the time. Tedious comedy delivers one unfunny gag after another. And then it ends. Did Lewis and Friedman even have a script for this? The fictional film-within-the-film, 'Nature's Nudnicks' is a flop. That doesn't deter the would-be movie moguls from immediately embarking on their next project. Does art imitate life or what? Musical score isn't even good enough for a 60s travelogue.

The Brain From Planet Arous (1958) 74m

Wooden acting, dumb dialogue, cheap effects. But a good central idea! Evil Brain of title turns out to be a fugitive from another galaxy, with a second Brain (looking exactly like the first, conveniently saving money) hot on its spinal cord to bring it to justice. Brain #1 hides inside scientist John Agar and uses his body to commit evil deeds (film's funniest moments are when the Brain tells Agar how much he's going to enjoy sampling his girlfriend). Agar's eyes turn silver and he blows up model planes (a laughable

effect, just as bad as the one in *Robot Monster*). Meanwhile, Brain #2 arrives and hides inside…well, a dog. There's some great, quirky ideas going on here – it's just a shame the packaging was naff.

The Brainiac (1962) 77m

Those who think that Ed Wood's productions were cheap should check out the not-very-special effects of this Mexican horror. Baron is burned at the stake in 1661, somehow transports himself into a passing comet (only the first of many rotten FX to come) and turns up back on Earth 300 years later to kill the descendants of his inquisitors. He does this by staring at them while a light flashes on his face, after which he stabs them in the neck with his tongue. The paucity of this film's budget makes it somehow endearing –the characters stand in front of blow-up photographs that serve as outdoor backdrops! One offbeat gem occurs when the reincarnated Baron first meets his antagonists-to-be and the three of them just stand there for a few moments as if waiting for someone to remember their lines.

The Bride and the Beast (1958) 78m

Newlyweds Dan (Lance Fuller) and Laura (Charlotte Austin) are approaching Dan's mansion when he informs her that he happens to keep a gorilla called Spanky in the basement. "Gorilla?" she says, her eyes lighting up. Or maybe it was the word "spanky". Kinky Ed Wood script throws in a few of his trademarks – an angora sweater, a handy doctor to explain character motivation, stock footage aplenty – and shows some perverse promise at the beginning. It turns out that Austin was a gorilla in a previous life, although she could just be having flashbacks to when she starred in *Gorilla at Large*. Unforgivably, the film ditches the only thing it has going for it (its premise) and instead becomes a long depiction of Dan, the Great White Hunter, going on safari in Africa. Some good tiger footage, but it should be in another movie. Initial idea of film doesn't reappear until conclusion when local gorilla carts away the confused Laura bride-over-the-threshold style. Dan cuts his losses and goes home. "Basically, we're all animals," the doe concludes, leaving us to imagine all kinds of bestial possibilities. Probably not many when you remember that Laura and Dan spent their honeymoon in separate beds. This was the third gorilla movie in a row for director Adrian Weiss.

Bride of the Monster (1956) 69m

More polished-looking-than-usual Edward D. Wood production, despite the bricks and mortar of the lab/dungeon being painted on hardboard. Bela Lugosi is an atomic scientist sequestered away at the old Willow house on Lake Marsh and up to the usual evil experiments. Engaged couple Dick and Janet (as police officer and journalist respectively) are meanwhile investigating stories of a monster in the lake. The editing, acting, and dialogue are all marginally better than other Wood efforts, which is why viewers raised on *Plan 9 from Outer Space* won't find as many laughs. Bad narrative structure divides the film into two halves – the first half, all about speculation concerning the monster, is really an unnecessary red herring which is jettisoned once Bela's side of the story gets cooking. Only laugh comes from Bela suddenly belting his mute musclebound assistant (Tor Johnson) while yelling "Get out! Get out!" and, later "I'll teach you to disobey me!" Uh, shouldn't that be 'teach you to *obey* me' Bela? This example of bad grammar might explain why Johnson goes troppo at the end. Various characters also wrestle with a lifeless rubber octopus, but this was probably funnier in Tim Burton's biopic *Ed Wood*. Still, it's worth seeing just for Bela's enjoyably overripe performance – he was particularly fond of his "I have no home" scene. Film's ludicrous ending features a 'localised' atomic detonation. Wood's idea of *mise-en-scene*: hanging a picture crooked on the wall.

The Candy Snatchers (1973) 94m

Look at the most twisted films you know and they've all come from the 70s. 16-year old schoolgirl Candy is kidnapped by two guys and a girl who figure they can get a good ransom for her. Kidnap films generally provide characters with the "excuse" to perform all kinds of depravity upon their victims for the benefit of the audience, more often than not followed afterwards by a good cathartic bout of revenge-motivated violence by the captor or associates thereof. *Candy Snatchers* looks set to follow the formula (poor Candy keeps getting buried

and gagged) but the emphasis is on the unlikely trio of kidnapers, who plainly have a plan but no room for contingencies. Their awkward dynamics pose as much threat to themselves as their hostage. Added to that, Candy's stepfather wants her dead, and her only help is a mute youngster who is constantly yelled at by his parents. These plot strands twist and turn in all kinds of unpredictable ways right up until the totally bent finale. If you're making a checklist of 70s exploitation, this should be on it.

Cannibal Girls (1973) 84m

Comedy-horror marks directorial debut of Ivan Reitman who managed to scrape up enough money and equipment to shoot principal photography in a few weeks. Finished product is a very professional-looking 'amateur' film – it stands apart from others in the pack because its acting is pretty decent. The highlights (improvised) come from Eugene Levy and Andrea Martin as a married couple driving cross-country. They learn of an isolated house which once was home to three cannibalistic sisters. This is related in an overlong flashback that seems like it should be the main story in the film...which in turn gives way to other strange turns in the plot. It soon becomes clear that Reitman is throwing in twists just for the sake of it, which is one of the film's major flaws. The blend of horror and comedy is uneven – given Reitman's future career as a successful comedy director it would be safe to assume that this film is meant to be read as a comedy with horror elements rather than a horror film with laughs.

The Capitol Hill Girls (1977) 80m

Included here only because it offers the promise of 3D sex with the tagline "the action jumps right into your lap!". While various lusty ladies get it on with visitors at Capitol Hill, another actor pretends he's in a story with a plot and sweats over a bet he placed. He ends up in a car trunk. The sex is all dull soft-core and the 3D process is hardly used to any lap jumping effect. Only half-decent shot is of one woman aiming a pool cue at the camera while she sizes up a shot on the table. You could have seen that in a G-rated film, for godsakes.

Cat Women of the Moon (1954) 64m

Completely daft story serves as an archetype for all campy 'alien sex goddess' movies, and was a direct influence on spoof *Amazon Women on the Moon*. Astronauts visit the moon, and discover a cave (which leads to a hidden city) with breathable oxygen. After avoiding the customary giant spider, which you just know is going to come back again later, the astronauts find themselves captives of the Cat Women who live in the city. The inclusion of a female crew member to the team promises some interesting developments, but as she's brainwashed by the Cat Women early on there's never any chance for a sharing of feminist philosophies. Filmed in 3-D, which is exciting if the thought of seeing cardboard moon exteriors turns you on. Cat Women distinctly lacking in any feline qualities.

A Certain Sacrifice (1985) 60m

Cheapo 8mm film transferred to video would never have been seen by anyone had it not included brief topless footage of a young Madonna before she became an international pop sensation. It's nothing to get excited about, especially as we've since seen her stripping off in *Body of Evidence*. Producer/writer Jeremy Pattnosh stars as Madonna's boyfriend, who runs into an obnoxious loudmouth played by Charles Kurtz (the film's most memorable scene). Kurtz sexually assaults Madonna for no other reason that he's a jerk. Pattnosh and friends respond by tying up Kurtz and staging an overlong, uninteresting ritual that showcases their musical talents, culminating in a chant 'Raymond Hall must die', which concludes with his death. Quality of video transfer isn't too good, especially during night/low-light scenes. Primarily of curio value.

Chafed Elbows (1966) 63m

Robert Downey's take on the New York underground scene is much more watchable than the films it emulates (or satirizes), thanks to a goofy sense of humour that is a mix of Marx Brothers and early Woody Allen magazine pieces. Patchy, carefree feel of film belies the fact that it took two years and $25,000 to make. Half of it is made of still photographs with character voiceovers (most of them supplied by regular players Elise Downey and Lawrence Wolf). George Morgan stars as a man

having an affair with his mother but then deciding to look for a job. Anything can happen in between, and it does – he gives birth to money, is labelled as a piece of art, accidentally kills or injures a few people, and returns home to mother. Downey pokes fun at doctors, artists, police, the music industry (the renditions of "Yeah Yeah Yeah" and its B-side "Hey Hey Hey" are a lot of fun), the film industry and sexual mores in general.

Chan is Missing (1982) 80m

Wayne Wang earned praise from critics for writing and directing this sharp and cryptic film on a very low budget. Saving money on sets, Wang moves his two main characters, the older Wood Moy and young, punkish Marc Hayashi all around San Francisco's Chinatown in search of the mysterious Chan, who may have absconded with their money. At first the story is legwork, but then becomes a character study, then a lifestyle study, and ultimately a meditation on the act of investigation. Characters follow 'leads' but improvisational feel of film/dialogue suggests that their search will amount to little but a traipse about the backrooms and sidestreets of a cultural microcosm. The object of the search is of less interest than the act of looking. How Zen! Wang abandons straight linear narrative in favour of meandering set pieces, so don't expect a paint-by-numbers plot.

Chappaqua (1966) 82m

Producer-Director-Star Conrad Rooks underwent detox after years of drug abuse. He could have just preached to people at length about his experience, but since his folks were rich he decided to make a movie about it instead. It's a fidgety 80-minute collage of sights and sounds without any real plot, but its lack of cohesion is conveniently excused by its subject, since this is what the whole drug thing is like, dude. Rooks films mainly around New York and an expensive chateau where he is going cold turkey, though the line between reality/fantasy is so blurred that these landscapes don't seem that relevant. Rooks stomps on sugar cubes that spell out LSD and meanders around in a drunken state, but never loses his cowboy hat. The supposition by the end is that he's cured, but with William Burroughs as one of his doctors, who can tell? The eclectic mix of Eastern music signals Rooks' interest in his second (and last) film, the much more sedate and contemplative *Siddhartha*.

The Cheerleaders (1973) 81m

Early teen sex comedy set stupid standard for the rest to follow. How about a girl named Jovita Bush, for example? It gets even worse: that's the name of the actor! Jovita and fellow cheerleaders engage in the usual high-school pranks, although (unlike many other films of this ilk) the fellow students seem to cop it more than the generic adult authority figures. One aspiring member of the team has to strip off in the boys' locker room. If that's not subtle enough, how about the ploy where the cheerleaders wear out the opposing team by having sex with all of them before the game? Film's only excuse is that it was made in the early seventies, so the stupid exploitation is in fact simple charm.

Cheerleaders Wild Weekend (1979) 84m

Busload of cheerleaders on way to competition get hijacked and taken to a remote shack, where they await the ransom that will free them. To kill time, their captors leer over them and hold a beauty contest. As their improvised dance routines testify, it's definitely not a talent contest. Just for added social commentary, the yellow-shirted team come from the poor side of town. Stock characters populate teams: the snooty rich bitch, the sassy black girl, the mild-mannered virgin. They all look the same with their clothes off. Routine cheerleader-exploitation fare.

Cherry, Harry, and Racquet (1969) 71m

Russ Meyer sex-and-action pic set in the desert. Cherry is a nurse who has sex with her patients, and Harry, and Racquel. Harry is a dope-smuggling sheriff who has sex with Cherry and Racquel. Racquel is a hooker who has sex with anybody. Film has low angles, squeaky bedsprings, gratuitous nudity (lots of footage of girl running about in the desert for no reason whatsoever), good car-chase/shoot-out scenes as Harry and his deputy go after The Apache, a local outlaw. Meyer's characters are drawn fairly crudely so these stories come across

as hilariously phoney morality plays. Film would be easily dismissed if not for Meyer's customary verve and style.

Ciao! Manhattan (1972) 84m

Warhol protege Edie Sedgwick stars as herself (though it's never stated as such) in this story about a drug-addled model who lives in the empty swimming pool outside her parents' house. A bit of a hybrid: although it looks like a polished product, film started out as an independent black and white documentary on Sedgwick. Underground *cinema-verite* thus integrates with rambling semi-biographical plot. Arresting because Sedgwick is truly out of it – who can tell when she's acting and when she isn't? She embodied the current New York counterculture but went a tad far by actually dying shortly after filming was completed. Document of the times is given emotional investment by the former model, whose fragility and vulnerability is quite poignant.

Colour Me Blood Red (1965) 79m

Another in a series of Herschell Gordon Lewis films in which young women are cut up to provide the local maniac with body bits for some home project. Surely the point of Indie films is that they can subvert genres, not slavishly follow them. Temperamental artist cannot find the right colour for his painting. "It's not the right colour!" he bawls. Finds quick solution by stabbing his girlfriend in the neck, wiping her all over the canvas, and *voilà!*, blood just happens to be the exact shade he's looking for. Since director Herschell Gordon Lewis is using stage blood instead of real blood it looks just the same as the rest of the paint in the movie. The third of the 'blood trilogy', as it became to be known, and the last of Lewis' associations with Dave Friedman. It's tighter than their other efforts because there's less attention to murders, and in leading loony Don Joseph, Lewis has found his best performer to date. The cast all round isn't bad, and the dialogue isn't as hack as usual.

Coming Apart (1969) 110m

And what better actor to star in a film of this title than Rip Torn? This first feature in the short-lived career of Milton Moses Ginsberg brings a polished edge to the underground aesthetic of leaving a camera running in one room by creating a specific motivation for the presence of the lens and having performers who really can act. As the film begins we witness Torn entertaining various women who visit his sofa (upon which the hidden camera is focused for the duration of the film) without any knowledge of who he is or what he's doing. Gradually details emerge that would have us believe he is not acting simply out of voyeurism, but as things heat up the less certain we become about his motives. A wall-sized mirror behind the couch is a useful enough device for letting us see the faces of the actors who would otherwise have their backs to the camera, but it also provides the film's central metaphor that film can only be a reflection of reality and not the real event itself. The performances are so natural you might forget that the actors knew there was a camera on them all the time. Film is by turns hilarious and unsettling; however its concept, lack of plot, and frank depiction of nudity kept it well out of the mainstream. It of course anticipated webcams, spycams, confessional cams and assorted other DIY voyeurism years ahead of its time.

Common Law Cabin (1967) 70m

Seedy innkeeper and his stacked wife (Babette Bardot) live in isolated riverside lodge in Colorado with their equally stacked daughter. Enter two tourists with a case full of money and raging hormones. Various members of cast are seduced, raped and shot in accompaniment to bright colours and snappy editing. It's Russ Meyer country, of course, stuffed full of his customary betrayals, lasciviousness, and vicious dialogue exchanges (mostly between frustrated married couples). Film's silly high point comes when Bardot performances a ritualistic dance in the guise of a wild native woman – there's no tourist gullible enough to fall for that routine. Well crafted, but not in the same league as other Meyer classics.

The Connection (1962) 110m

A day in the life of a loft full of junkies, as written by Jack Gelber (from a play) and directed by Shirley Clarke. It's the kind of exercise that is doomed to fail before it starts: in order to be realistic, said junkies

would need to ramble incoherently (when they weren't sleeping), which doesn't make for a particularly watchable movie. In order to make said movie watchable, characters and story must develop, which then loses the realistic slice-of-life that the film-makers are aiming for. It's best to leave this kind of stuff for documentary crews – a notion that Clarke and Gelber are aware of, as they frame their film as being recorded by a fictional documentary director. If the acting was a little better all around (there are some good moments) then the film could at least be enjoyed as a performance piece. A game attempt at portraying a seedier side of life unknown to cinema audiences, but undone by its staginess (four of the junkies just happen to form a jazz quartet that plays a few musical interludes throughout the movie). Drinking game you can play: take a shot every time a character says "man" or "baby" – you won't be conscious by the final credits

The Cool World (1963) 105m

A play, a novel, and finally a film – though it is surely the latter that will live on. Shirley Clarke turned out to be a great choice to direct Warren Miller's story about small-time punks living in Harlem (not unexpectedly, the few white characters in the film are authority figures). Hampton Clanton wants to be a "cool killer"; the emptiness of his life provides him with only one dream – to raise 75 dollars to buy a gun and gain leadership of his washed-up gang The Pythons so that he can be a big man. This quest is the thread upon which hang all other events in the film, giving it a purpose and direction which would have otherwise been lost. Clarke needed only to shoot on location to give the film its realism, regardless of story (is it any surprise that it was produced by Frederick Wiseman, who would later become one of the great documentary film-makers?). Some of the acting is strictly second-rate (looping the dialogue probably didn't help) but it doesn't matter as these characters are limited and inarticulate anyway. Rough, patchy, raw film-making was ahead of its time not only for its themes but also use of natural – i.e. profane – dialogue.

The Corpse Grinders (1971) 72m

Ted V. Mikels film isn't nearly as gruesome as its advertising artwork, which surely contributed to its good business. New owner of a pet food plant (Sanford Mitchell) keeps himself in operation by grinding up corpses and turning them into cat food. Unexpected side effect: cats get a taste for blood and attack their owners. These cat attacks alert local doctor (Sean Kenney) and his nurse girlfriend (Monika Kelly), who go investigating and get into the usual trouble. Fairly grimy-looking production suits subject matter, though actually it's pretty restrained. Subliminal edits are about as flashy as Mikels gets. Handy tip: when you're letting corpse-grinding bad guys know that you're on to them and intend going to the police, don't stand right next to the corpse-grinding machine. Story was co-written by Arch Hall, no slouch himself in the sleaze department.

Creation of the Humanoids (1962) 80m

Better have a cup of coffee handy to get through this one. There's nothing wrong with having a sci-fi film that prefers talk to action, but when it's handled as leadenly as this you're just crying out for a couple of monsters and a ray gun. Story, which is often mistakenly attributed to Sci-Fi writer Jack Williamson, is set in post-apocalypse future where nuclear war has wiped out 92% of the human race. The remaining 8% must have all been near-geniuses because soon a robot workforce is created to help rebuild society. Thanks to the discovery of the magnetic integrator neuron duplicator (add the initials), artificial intelligence is everywhere, prompting the foundation of a humanoid-hating organisation with the rather Cronenbergian title The Order of Flesh and Blood. Story follows the personal journey of discovery undertaken by one member of the Order who flips out when he learns that his sister has shacked up with a robot. Much discourse follows, from one static setup to the next. Cast doesn't act: it talks. There are some good lines and intriguing ideas, but the whole thing comes off like a class discussion and the embarrassingly cheap sets don't help. Story ends with robots being manufactured to have sex and produce other robots (just as it was getting interesting). Credited as Andy Warhol's favourite

film, but he also said that about *The Other Side of Midnight* and *Barbarella*, so who knows?

The Creature from the Haunted Sea (1961) 63m

The crudely-animated title credits indicate quite clearly where this one is heading. Opening scenes in a bar have some zip and give us the message "Roger Corman and his crew are enjoying their tropical vacation". Monster itself is sublimely awful – it's a pop-eyed Gumby covered in scum. Gumby has more facial expressions.

The Creeping Terror (1964) 75m

Everyone associated with this film should have been issued with some kind of cinematic restraining order that never let them near a camera again in their lives. Now-legendary Z-grader has not one, but two disastrous selling points –firstly, a terrible monster (it's a carpet) and secondly, an entire soundtrack dubbed in post-production. More than half of the film has narration to explain what we would be hearing if it had an audio track (the narrator appears to have been enlisted from public service films) but live sound would still not have been enough to save the movie from its utter lack of suspense. After landing on Earth the monster manages to move at the speed of a turtle through open countryside in broad daylight without ever being seen by all the people who are looking for it. Luckily it has found the only place in the world where human beings choose to stand still and cry while it drags itself slowly forward in order to eat them, which it does, again and again, for the duration of the entire film. Victims wriggle into its maw as if they were trying to return to the womb (or maybe this is a militant feminist monster with a *vagina dentata* thing going on). At least in this movie the monster isn't killed by some last-minute scientific breakthrough – it just gets hit by a car. Another triumph for human know-how!

The Curious Dr Humpp (1968) 85m

Directed by no-one you've ever heard of and starring nobody you know, this Argentinian exploitation pic was given some extra sex scenes for its US distribution. A mad scientist creates dry ice, flashing lights and the occasional spark in his laboratory, resulting in discoveries that will take him beyond the sexual threshold of man!!! To this end he kidnaps several sexual 'deviants' and timetables them in for sessions of exhaustive coupling so that he may extract the vital serum from their libidos that will keep him alive. Oh yeah, and there's a talking brain in a jar, too. Supposedly it belongs to another mad scientist (the one who gives the orders) but its size looks more like it belongs to (a) a beagle, or (b) whoever wrote this. Almost every line of dialogue is wonderfully ridiculous ("A monster just came in with a prescription") but their entertainment value is interrupted by the boring naked grope sessions which substitute as sex scenes and take up a lot of the running time. The cinematography/camerawork is surprisingly competent. The rest isn't, which is why you should see it.

Dance Hall Racket (1953) 64m

The only other cheapie by Phil Tucker that's generally seen by anyone (*Robot Monster* being his claim to fame). Tucker is hardly any presence as a director, leaving the film in the hands of up-and-coming standup comedian Lenny Bruce, who appears as Vinnie, the right-hand man of racketeer Umberto Scalli (Timothy Farrel). The titular Dance Hall is a cramped, featureless room furnished with a couple of tables, a potted palm, and a severely understocked bar. Scalli is awaiting the return of a mobster who knows the whereabouts of a hidden cache. In the meantime life at the Dance Hall goes on as usual. At first it looks like the story is going to follow any one of a number of standard exploitation fallbacks, including (a) the undercover cop investigating a diamond smuggling ring, (b) the innocent young girl introduced to the shady environment of Dance Hall life, or (c) the cover-up of a murder in the club ("I want to see you all three of you in my office!" Scalli reprimands his employees after one of them accidentally kills a client) but the film ignores these events and becomes a series of quirky incidents and eavesdropped conversations. As Bruce wrote the screenplay, his performance comes across more naturally than others in the cast who don't have the right delivery for his wise-ass tough-guy dialogue. Among the dance hall girls is stripper Honey Harlowe, Bruce's wife of two years.

Dark Star (1974) 83m

Student film by horror director John Carpenter and inventive screenwriter Dan O'Bannon was expanded for theatrical release and was Carpenter's only foray into comedy until *Big Trouble in Little China* several years later. Claustrophobic spaceship settings are in service of low budget: four astronauts (five, counting their cryonically-frozen captain), one talking computer, and a beach-ball shaped alien wander about space in a dead-end mission to seek-and-destroy 'unstable' planets. Film is about the effect the space travel has on the men, rather than the mission itself. They're like rats in a maze – this is highlighted in a lengthy sequence where one of the astronauts (O'Bannon) plays hide and seek with their belligerent alien 'pet' in the cramped, featureless corridors. Enjoyable film has a special place in Sci-Fi cinema. Computer has a good final line.

Deadly Weapons (1973) 75m

Pretty slick Doris Wishman feature (she uses a tripod for the camera this time) stars Chesty Morgan as a woman whose lover is rubbed out by gangsters. She and her 73-inch bust then take a trip to the coast to find them. Once gaining their confidence, she drugs and smothers them. Clue: she doesn't use pillows. Nobody could ever accuse Wishman of coming up with a complicated plot. Final scene is interesting in that it is unexpected, but features one of the most badly-acted death scenes in cinema. Best line: "You call me Captain Hook again and I'll blow your brains out!" Question to consider: If you were as top-heavy as Morgan would you be walking around in high heels and platform shoes? Morgan and Wishman teamed up again for the even more imaginative *Double Agent 73*.

The Defilers (1965) 68m

Polished but nevertheless sleazy film from Lee Frost. Two swinging guys (Byron Mabe and Jerome Eden) kidnap a girl (Mai Jansson) and keep her down in the basement where they can beat and rape her at leisure. Just for kicks, you understand. As well as slaps, and an occasional whack with a belt. Actually, this doesn't happen until the last 25 minutes of the film, which means the viewer is denied some of the more interesting personal conflict between the two men. Distasteful, but the story does firmly sympathise with the girl (who the men never refer to by name) and makes the male characters repellent. It doesn't pretend to be a male fantasy, although obviously this will be the case for some enlightened individuals. Weird thing is that if the sex roles were reversed and it was two girls kidnapping a guy to be their sex slave, it would still be a male fantasy! Debut performance for Mabe, who would go on to direct his own low-grade pictures.

Dementia (1955) 56m

Girl with obvious problems goes out on the town, gets picked up by a guy, kills him, and then worries that she'll be caught. You can't get a much simpler story than that. Writer-director-producer John Parker made only one film, this exercise in storytelling through cinema. The absence of a live soundtrack in favour of a few added effects such as gunshots, slapping, screaming, etc, is a budgetary choice, but Parker makes it seem an artistic one. Is it good? Is it bad? It's not as experimental or avant-garde as some would like to believe it is; if anything, it's a throwback to the days of German silent movies, albeit transplanted to seedy, *noir*-ish urban settings of the 50s. There's a lot of talk about what is real and what is not, but it doesn't add up to much. Parker handles the business of making a film with some savvy, however, and there are some nods to Freudian imagery (the knife as weapon in the hands of the 'castrating' female; the smouldering cigar that betrays a wife's infidelity). Picture was retitled *Daughter of Horror*, trimmed, and re-released with narration. The portentous narrator (Ed McMahon, of all people!) snarls out remarks like "Do you know what *horror* is?" and "Was it only a *dream*?" as if he were Criswell in an Ed Wood film. The spooky "wa-a-a-ahhh" refrain is about as cliched as Mysterious Dream Music can get, but its unsubtle repetition does move the film out of the borders of reality and into an artifice more appropriate for its subject.

Desperate Living (1977) 90m

The elegant titles for this film might suggest that sleazemeister John Waters was about to go legit. Wrooonnggg! It's just as perverse as his previous

efforts, although not as extreme – in fact he was almost required to make this movie as proof that he could attract a wider audience and subsequently get backing for a bigger budget (*Polyester*, his first 35mm effort, followed four years later). First ten minutes has to be the funniest in Waters' career: Mink Stole returns home from a sanatorium and immediately cracks up again. She runs away with her maid and ends up in an elaborate, otherwordly shanty town which is run by self-appointed queen Edith Massey. Their 'desperate living' outlines the trials of living in this maniacal place, where Massey has the power to decree (under pain of death) whatever she desires. Characters plot against each other constantly. Surreal atmosphere is enhanced by cramped, shabby sets and garish decor (if eyes could vomit, they couldn't find a better reason than this). The unflattering nudity of the characters keeps the general feeling of the film sleazy. Ironically, Waters' best film to date didn't feature his number one star Divine.

Diary of a Nympho (1973) 85m

Usual exploitation fare from Jess Franco. Linda, the nympho of the title, is dispatched early on in the film, providing us with the excuse to pore over her early misadventures (in flashback) as recorded in her diary. After being molested on a Ferris wheel at a low-rent fair, Jenny naturally enough turns into a sex fiend. Dr Freud, eat your heart out. Nothing special here, although not all the nudity is gratuitous. For example, one character announces "I hate wearing clothes!" just before stripping off. Film is competent enough whenever Franco sticks to the basics; hilarious when he tries to get arty – witness the early scene in which two women discuss Linda's past: it looks like a bad perfume commercial.

Dr Butcher, MD (1979) 90m

Ugly film looks like a patch-up of out-takes and abandoned footage from a couple of other movies. It was. Members of an unknown, primitive tribe show up in the city and bump off a few citizens with poison darts. Next thing you know, there's an expedition to Africa to find aforesaid tribe and sort out just exactly what is going on. Only other white man in the area is of the mad-doctor persuasion, who likes to tie women to tables and remove various organs. Rest of cast run through the jungle, battle natives and fall into pits. Sex, gore, zombies, body painting, lab-in-flames. You've seen it all before. Crude look of film is suitably visceral though.

The Doll Squad (1974) 95m

Director Ted V. Mikels is certain that this film inspired the TV series *Charlie's Angels*, but a team of female secret agents isn't too difficult a concept to come up with. Francine York is Sabrina (another *Angels* coincidence) the leader of the 'Doll Squad' that sets off to stop the usual madman from his usual plot to destroy the world (plague-infested rats, this time). There is much shooting and running around. This is occasionally relieved by running around and shooting. Planes, buildings, people explode in optically-printed flames. A lot of action, but no substitute for a good plot. Film doesn't work because while the concept of an all-female hit squad is its selling point, there is no real reason why the story requires them – this mission could have been accomplished by any team, female or otherwise.

Double Agent 73 (1974) 73m

Doris Wishman, the queen of exploitation, outdoes herself with this one. Chesty Morgan (most likely a pseudonym) is a secret agent with appalling dress sense and a 73-inch bustline. She's sent out to identify and, if possible, eliminate the gang of a heroin dealer named Toplar. Who better to send after Toplar's agents than a topless agent? Have bust, will travel. To get pictures of the agents, Morgan has a secret camera implanted in her left breast. This means that whenever she wants to photograph anyone she has to take her clothes off first, a much less conspicuous strategy than simply hiding the camera in her purse. The sight of Morgan's pendulous attributes is anything but erotic. More distracting to the eye is the supremely tacky decor and costuming. Weirdest aspect of movie is that almost nobody comments on or even notices Morgan's huge breasts, even when they're being photographed (or clubbed) by them.

Dracula vs Frankenstein (1971) 87m

Al Adamson does a bit of a Frankenstein routine himself on this one, adding in bikers, beach bunnies, an LSD trip, a lacklustre song-and-dance routine and the titular monsters. Seems both Frank and Drac want to "energise" people's blood to give them some kind of immortality (as if they weren't immortal enough already). Anthony Eisley stars as the boyfriend of Vegas singer Mrs Adamson...uh, Regina Carrol, who has too much hair and is looking for her missing sister. Lon Chaney features in a wordless (also thankless) role as Groton, Frank's mail-order lumbering assistant, who gets shot by the cops at the film's end and does the prerequisite fall from a high ledge. Drac blows up Eisley with his laser ring and then pulls 'The Monster' apart in a forest over a disagreement about what to do with the unconscious heroine. Sound like fun? It isn't. There are better bad movies than this one.

Dutchman (1966) 55m

Amiri Baraka's two-character play is filmed entirely on a subway train, although the opening title appears to be a tipoff that their journey is more metaphorical than literal. Combining Freud's train-journey-as-death imagery with the notion that the characters are bound, Flying Dutchman style, to the subway forever, and that they spend all their time underground, the setting is obviously hell (there are pictures of the devil inside the train) and Lula (Lucifer?), dressed in slinky, serpent-like stripes, and with apple at the ready, is intent on seducing and tormenting fellow passenger Clay (Adam, made of clay by God?). While much of the talk initially is a prolonged sexual arabesque, it eventually culminates with a violent monologue from Clay (is he a murderer condemned to damnation?) and a violent act during which other passengers, who slowly populate the train, remain silent as if they were just another bunch of lost souls along for the ride. As Lula, Shirley Knight's acting style is a little too florid (but her manic expression is chilling at the end) against Al Freeman's more naturalistic approach, although it does make sense as a 'performance' being put on by her character for her own manipulative pleasure.

Eegah! (1962) 92m

Richard Kiel, who is best known for his role as the villain 'Jaws' in a couple of Bond films, plays title role of caveman discovered by dune-buggy riding teenagers in California. Check out the size of his hands! Kiel was offered role by director Arch Hall, who was his landlord at the time. Arch Hall Jr was offered lead teenage role by Arch Hall, who was his father at the time, thus allowing him the opportunity to perform forgettable rock'n'roll songs. Kiel kidnaps Hall's girlfriend (Marilyn Manning) and takes her back to his cave, where she gives him a few pointers to adapt to 20th Century civilisation before making a run for it. "Eegahhh!" says Eegah, before setting off after her. With a cave, some furs, a couple of buggies and a pool party, who needs a budget? Most fun comes from watching Kiel leer over Manning.

Eaten Alive (1976) 89m

Strange Tobe Hooper film, set in a dim, mist-shrouded, dilapidated 'hotel' in a bayou, but filmed entirely indoors on a set. Now and then a car rolls slowly in from the fog as if to suggest there is another world 'out there'. Hooper's second film, like his first (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) has the feeling of nightmare: the characters stumble into a strange world and become trapped in a situation that makes no sense. Misfits kill tourists; a giant alligator is fed bodies, characters come and go. Gorier than *Massacre* and uncomfortable, particularly when women are stripped of their clothes and appear completely vulnerable within the dark and decay. Nightmare aspect well realized in one sequence where a child crawls under the house to hide. This second feature seemed to confirm Hooper's gritty style, which he then lost upon winning contracts with major studios.

Eaten Alive (1980) 87m

Umberto Lenzi's sort-of sequel to *Man From Deep River* (in that it recycles some of the same footage) finds attractive Janet Agren going to New Guinea in search of her sister. It turns out she's living in a sect run by a Jim Jones-style fanatic who has the power to mesmerise his followers and summon Bach's D Minor Toccata and Fugue at will. And where better to set up their village than right next door to a tribe of cannibals? Men eat crocs. Crocs eat men. Men eat

men. Men eat women. Guess which two cast members end up on the menu? The ending is pretty distasteful (no pun intended) when you consider the Guyana massacre was still fresh in everyone's minds. Also stars the beautiful Me Me Lai, whose bustline had improved noticeably since the earlier cannibal movie. Must be all that red meat. Filmed on location in Sri Lanka.

End of the World (1977) 86m

Meandering Charles Band pic isn't horror or Sci-Fi or even interesting. Christopher Lee is an alien hiding out with a group of nuns (also aliens), tinkering about with plans to destroy the Earth because of the terrible state it's in. Luckily Kirk Scott and Sue Lyon stumble upon his plan just in time to hop a quick dematerialization transport outta there. Kind of a "Should we stay with the Earth and get blown up, honey, or catch a ride with the aliens?" moment. Did that just give away the end of the film? What did you expect from a title like 'End of the World'? Try and stay awake for the special effects miracle that closes the picture.

Equinox (1969) 82m

Best to think of this as an impressive home movie – it was filmed in 16mm then blown up to 35 when new footage was added. Acting is of the 'bunch of friends in front of the camera' calibre. Directors Jack Woods and Mark Thomas McGee obviously loved Ray Harryhausen movies when they were kids: story features gang of youngsters who come into possession of a book which is desired by evil demon. Consequently teenagers are terrorised by stop-motion monsters (actually not too bad). Usual amateur pitfalls – bad dubbing, budgetary constraints, etc – but unfair to criticise when so many of us have dreamed of producing our own 8mm/video epics on this sort of scale. Surprising appearance by acclaimed Sci-Fi/Fantasy/Horror writer Fritz Leiber.

Eraserhead (1977) 94m

A genuine original. David Lynch started his career by bewildering viewers and hasn't looked back since. Set in a nowhere-zone which may be a depressed industrial town, and filmed in charcoal-graded black and white, Lynch's story follows the life (or non-life) of lonely man Henry (Jack Nance, a Lynch regular) in a dingy apartment. Henry gets his girlfriend pregnant, and is then left holding the baby – if that's what it is. Story is secondary to mood, which is in service to the representation of dreams, nightmares, existentialism, surrealism, and expressionism. Film manages to be funny, unnerving, baffling and repulsive. Conception/abortion images occasionally surface through the murk, so it's hard to dismiss any notion that Lynch was simply throwing in anything he could think of for the sake of effect. In fact he kept very tight control over the look and sound of his film. Better than the avant-garde films that this may remind you of. Lynch got some financing from AFI and Sissy Spacek, the girlfriend of his buddy and set designer Jack Fisk.

The Erotic Adventures of Zorro (1972) 84m

The only moment that comes close to eroticism in this number is a gently-paced bedroom scene with two women. Otherwise, it's almost standard sex-comedy material. Almost. There's a couple of kinky bits where a woman is frightened by a python, and a soldier molests another woman with his foot (!). David Friedman, who co-wrote and directed, probably felt that his production values were pretty good and so gave the plot precedence over the sex scenes. Not altogether successful, but it does look better than others of the genre, and you can sense the film-makers putting some effort into it. The few laughs come from hearing the characters suddenly break out of the period mould to mutter expletives. Robert Cresse is funny in a small role.

Eve and the Handyman (1961) 65m

Russ Meyer's follow-up to *The Immoral Mr Teas* loses most of the nudity and focuses more on the humour – which is a shame because you've seen the same kind of gags executed in much shorter time in old Benny Hill shows. Meyer's wife Eve follows the rather nerdy 'Handyman' all over town, crooking her mouth to snide at each one of his risqué encounters (like *Teas*, it was shot without sound), often becoming the object of the encounters in a dual role. We already figure that Meyer isn't going to have his wife strip for the camera, so the titillation isn't that great.

The Evil Dead (1982) 86m

What could have become just another cheap, amateur splatter movie is saved by director Sam Raimi's bravura style, and a gung-ho performance by Bruce Campbell, who would star in the two bigger-budgeted sequels *Evil Dead II* and *Army of Darkness*, and a spinoff TV series. Those followups put just as much emphasis on the humour as the horror. The original isn't without its quirkiness ("You're going to be all right," Campbell tells his completely mutilated friend), but here Raimi plays it relatively straight and aims for the jugular. Rocket-ride camerawork and punchy editing really draw the most out of this simple story of a group of young men and women who spend the night in a deserted cabin and find they have unleashed the proverbial Forces of Evil. Hey, all they did was read from a book bound with human skin! The film-makers are in obvious control of their medium – this sets it apart from most of its low-budget kin. Held up as an example of the worst type of film during the 'video nasties' debate in the early eighties. Do you need any other reason to see it?

Female Trouble (1974) 92m

More perversion with overweight transvestite star Divine dished up by Baltimore director John Waters. As usual, the plot is barely worth recounting, and it's the images you'll remember. Surely the most unforgettable is Divine being raped by herself/himself by his/her male alter ego (this sort of thing wouldn't happen again until 1983's *Liquid Sky*). But then there's also the sight of Divine as a schoolgirl in class; Divine jumping up and down on a trampoline before an appreciative audience; Divine randomly shooting at her appreciative audience. Waters regulars David Lochary and Mary Vivian Pearce play hairdressers who lead Divine into a life of crime while they observe from the sidelines, Mink Stole is Divine's illegitimate daughter, Edith Massey is 'Aunt Ida'. Not really as funny as other Waters efforts, but it is strangely reassuring to see his stock company all together as one demented family. Waters and co. *are* fringe cinema.

Finders Keepers, Lovers Weepers (1968) 72m

It doesn't seem that Russ Meyer has his heart in this one until the last twenty minutes. Paul Lockwood owns a bar and plays around with other women while wife Anne Chapman decides she's had enough and fools around with one of his employees. Meanwhile, two hoods are planning to rob the bar. Finale, which involves the usual explosion of tensions in most Meyer films, comes off tougher than usual because trademark humour is absent. Made with skill, as you'd expect, but not a good introduction to Meyer – it's too talky for one thing.

Flesh (1968) 105m

Paul Morrissey, the most talented director of Andy Warhol's 'Factory' (and that includes Andy himself) takes his first tentative steps towards commercial cinema. Not that this is by any means mainstream – it's just more watchable than the other film experiments that Warhol and friends produced. Joe Dallesandro is a New York hustler who has sex with customers and friends. What, you were expecting a plot? Film is a peephole into a way of life alien and undesirable to most of us, although Dallesandro doesn't seem too perturbed by it. Then again, he's unresponsive to mostly everything – even orgasms count for nothing. The scene that reveals real warmth behind the man is a wordless, interestingly filmed exchange between Dallesandro and his baby son playing on the floor. Laid-back attitude, frequent (and unarousing) nudity, and routine discussions about sex are presented in a similarly casual filming/editing manner. Andy says: it's no big deal, it's just the underground.

The Food of the Gods (1976) 88m

Director Bert I. Gordon making giants out of things, again. You know he's going to revert to formula as soon as you see the title credit 'based on a portion of the book by H G Wells'. Football jock visits an island with friend who gets stung to death by oversized wasps. Turns out an elderly married couple are feeding their chickens the 'food of the gods' (or FOTG, as it is helpfully labelled on their jars) that they've found bubbling out of the ground, figuring they can get rich off the stuff. Well, it worked for the Beverly Hillbillies. Bert forgets about the chickens and wasps and goes for a rat attack movie instead.

The effects aren't bad in spots but stink in others (the dam-bursting scene, for example). First half of movie is pretty flabby, but there's quite a bit of action at the end, and lots of rats.

For Your Height Only (1979) 87m

The name's Weng....Weng Weng. That's the pint-sized star who plays Agent 00 in this downsized James Bond imitation – he even has Oddjob's lethal hat from *Goldfinger*. Actually, it is patterned more after Jackie Chan than Bond. Agent 00 – who has no hesitation in introducing himself as "Hi, I'm Secret Agent 00" to whomever he meets – saves a young woman from sniper fire. Turns out she has refused to join a prostitution/drugs syndicate..."and now I get shot at once or twice a week" she concludes miserably. 00 decides it's his duty to help her out. Most of film is taken up with 00 running, sneaking about, shooting at people, beating up people, and – his specialty – sliding along the floor. In fact the gun battles get so overblown towards the end that it's hard to figure out what kind of audience this is supposed to be pitched for. Novelty of premise wears out after five minutes, but Weng is an energetic and assured performer: He doesn't make the film seem at all exploitative.

The Foreigner (1978) 90m

One of a number of indie products from the New York underground scene, distinguishable only in that it features punk musicians scattered throughout the cast. NY indie film-maker Eric Mitchell stars as the title character, a vague sort of 'agent' who spends three weeks in the city waiting for something to happen, which was one week longer than it took to make the actual film. He runs into a number of people who have some kind of connection with him, almost all hostile, but you won't care what's going on because it's too difficult to understand the characters' motivations or their relation to each other. Film bears hallmarks of all that's bad about amateur films, including sloppy narrative and terrible acting by friends of the director (Amos Poe). Despite five names credited for the audio, the sound still manages to suck. Debbie Harry has a cameo bumming a cigarette in an alley. Other faces in the cast will be known only to punk aficionados.

Gator Bait (1976) 88m

Bayou picture by Ferd and Beverly Sebastian is well handled and features Claudia Jennings as a swamp girl who goes after the marginally-more-civilized local good ole boys who attacked her siblings and burned down the family shack. Jennings is a child of nature, but here nature is untamed – she essentially needs do little more than lure her tormentors into her home turf. Story is purely formulaic but the vast, spooky, primeval setting is well utilised and the camerawork, editing, and acting are above par for this sort of thing. Characters seem broadly drawn but surprise you sometimes when inner/outward conflicts are revealed.

Girl in Gold Boots (1968) 91m

Michele (Leslie McCrae) quits her dead-end job at a diner and catches a ride to LA with potential love interests Buz (Tom Pace) and Critter (Jody Daniel) with the aim of becoming a dancer. Something of a departure for Ted V. Mikels, one of the more professional of the indie film-makers, who is best known for his horror films. Story emphasizes its seedy side, however. What appears to be a story about Michele turns into a story about Buz – just as well, as the 'Gold Boot Girl Dancers' are strictly second-rate. Unlike other ingenue-goes-to-Hollywood pies, the heroine doesn't graduate from a tiny nightclub to bigger and better venues – she just stays in the nightclub and gives up. This is contingent with film's low budget, of course, but it's still a much more realistic scenario. Good performance from Daniel.

Goke: The Body Snatcher from Hell (1969) 82m

Inspired opening to this horror pie from Japan lives up its potential – the storyline never settles down into anything routine. A jet liner with a handful of passengers crashes into barren, rocky mountains. Everyone on board seems OK but then "something" – let's call it Goke – enters the body of one unpleasant young man. This is achieved through the expedient of the cheapest special effect possible: a photograph of his head rips open. The dialogue gets weirder and weirder; the ever-shifting group dynamics are

hilarious. Film's anti-war message is delivered with the subtlety of a sledgehammer – the passengers just happen to comprise of a politician, an arms dealer, a war widow, a terrorist, a psychiatrist and a political assassin. Just the group to put together on a plane! The assassin wears white gloves throughout, as if waiting for a point in the story when he can jump into a rendition of 'Mammy'. Given the unpredictable nature of the story, it wouldn't seem out of place. Final shots are great.

Good Morning ... and Goodbye (1967) 80m

By-the-numbers Russ Meyer picture: portentous narration, bitchy dialogue, men having fist fights, women who treat their men like trash, men who treat women as sex objects, women skinny-dipping, 4WDs, etc, etc. All that's missing is the nudity – there's none in the actual story, only in the gratuitous pre-and-post-credits shots. All that really distinguishes it from other Meyer works is that, for a change, the put-upon protagonist (who is in his fifties) manages to win back his young, voluptuous wife and reassert himself sexually. Meyer was 45 when he made this one, so maybe he decided it was time for the older man to get the girl. Features yet another Meyer character called 'Angel'.

The Gore Gore Girls (1972) 84m

The apotheosis of Herschell Gordon Lewis' career? In his penultimate film he mixes together elements of his three favourite genres – comedy, gore, and nudity. Plot follows investigator 'Abraham Gentry' on the trail of a maniac who is mutilating young women. Is there any point going on? The expected grue ensues, although this time there are a few bizarre touches that highlight its absurd excess (e.g. blood in bubblegum; a bottle of acid labelled 'Made in Poland'). The guy playing Gentry provides one of Lewis' most memorable characters – he's either good at acting obnoxious or he's a creep in real life. As an investigator, he's a dud. Lazy script contrives of nothing more than Gentry asking people 'Do you know where such-and-such is?' In-joke about nightclub name (Marz's Heaven) after a Ray Bradbury story is about as literate as script gets. Even worse than the primitive-but-brutal gore is a stunningly non-erotic striptease to the Radetzky March. Henny Youngman stars as a nightclub owner. In this film? Now that really is sick.

Glen or Glenda? (1953) 67m

Ed Wood's best film: it just has to be art. It's hard to believe anyone would make his debut feature a semi-documentary about transvestism, let alone (1) star in it himself, (2) pad it out with scenes of bondage and surrealism, and (3) hire Bela Lugosi in an unfathomable role as narrator/ranter. Wood had some personal demons to exorcise with this one (namely his attraction to angora sweaters) but also saw it as an opportunity to inform the public about divergent sexuality. Film was extraordinarily daring in 1953 – it would have had an angora sweater's chance in hell of being backed by a studio. It's also screamingly funny in spots. Wood's intentions are good, but his dialogue is terrible. He seems so awed to have a name star like Lugosi – who was on the skids at the time – in front of his camera that he lets him act however he likes. This is truly one of a kind, and for that it is valuable.

Greetings (1968) 88m

With this one Brian De Palma gained membership to that select club of film-makers who were able to whip up a movie in two weeks. It's the kind of thing that gets labeled 'actor's movie', rather than 'director's movie', but of course De Palma isn't going to stand for that, so makes sure we remember he's behind the camera by changing the film speeds, cross-cutting between double perspectives, pixilating, having the actors deliver an occasional line to the camera, and dollying the camera in long tracking shots. Mostly, however, he just leaves the camera running in a static setup while Robert De Niro, Gerrit Graham, and Jonathan Warden improvise at length – some of these scenes are engaging, others are flat. The war is raging in Vietnam, and these three characters while away the time with their own private obsessions, waiting to see if their ruses to dodge the draft have worked. It has a satirical/political flavour absent from future De Palma works, but contains the voyeurism that would become a noticeable element of his films in the 70s and 80s. De Niro would reprise his character in the sequel *Hi, Mom!*

The Gruesome Twosome (1968) 80m

Now if you saw a sign saying "Rooms for Rent" right next to a store window advertising "100% Human Hair, Wigs for Sale" would you move in? If that isn't enough warning, try this one: never trust any landlady that ends every sentence with "my dear". The first girl to do so gets promptly scalped, of course. The rest of the plot is as follows: Electric knife in throat. Machete through stomach. Hatpin in eye. Rather than produce yet another unfunny comedy or bad horror film, director-writer-producer Herschell Gordon Lewis decided to save time by combining the two genres and screwing them up simultaneously. Plot is strictly cliché. Characters handle bright red viscera lovingly. Probably best avoided by those who are squeamish or faint at the sight of boredom. The ridiculous prologue was added because Lewis thought the film's running time was too short.

The Hideous Sun Demon (1959) 74m

Radiation poisoning again. The victim this time is director/star Robert Clarke, who finds that his cell mutation is accelerated whenever he's exposed to UV rays, devolving him into a scaly humanoid. Consequently the only time he's able to go outside is at night, where he frequents bars, gets into fights, picks up a girl, and romps with her on the beach by moonlight. Predictable storyline, but some good scenes: in one, a thug forces Clarke outdoors at gunpoint into broad sunlight – of course we know what's going to happen next. Scene where he befriends a little girl is reminiscent of Frankenstein, another ostracised monster. The look of the 'sun demon' itself isn't anything special.

Hollywood Boulevard (1976) 83m

Debut for directors Joe Dante and Alan Arkush looks much better (i.e. professional) than other quickies because they had the resources of Roger Corman's New World studios at hand. Storywise, they stick to what they know: making movies. Paul Bartel is at his funniest as a pretentious, aggravated director reduced to churning out sex-and-violence cheapies. In the middle of the mayhem, various cast members are dispatched by stunts that go awry and other odd incidents. Bartel keeps the camera rolling: is he the murderer? Film has prerequisite amounts of nudity; action (good car-out-of-control sequence); and the film-within-the-film supplies enough machine guns to fill the violence quota, all cribbed from other Corman films that Dante and Arkush had access to in the editing room. You get the feeling the film-makers were having a lot of fun with this. Bartel's regular screen sidekick Mary Woronov also features.

The Hollywood Strangler Meets the Skid Row Slasher (1979) 70m

There is a term for this kind of film-making. In this case, it's 'pathetic'. The plot is summarised thus: Hollywood Strangler kills girl posing for his camera. Strangler kills another girl. Skid Row Slasher kills wino. Strangler kills two girls. Slasher kills wino. Strangler kills two girls. Strangler kills another girl. Slasher kills wino. Strangler meets Slasher. Can you guess what happens next? Then you don't have to watch this pointless no-budget home movie by Ray Dennis Steckler.

The Horror of Party Beach (1964) 78m

Terrible story construction nearly takes all the campiness out of this low-concept flick. Nuclear waste is casually jettisoned near an extremely popular beach (you can barely see the sand for the dancing teenagers), giving birth to pigeon-toed monsters. They look like (a) hybrids of fish and frilled lizards, or (b) men in costumes. Much of the film is taken up with dancing teenagers and fish-men stalking their victims. In one act of mercy, they slaughter twenty girls at an excruciatingly dull slumber party (they were singing cowboy songs, they deserved it). There's the usual scientist father, clean-cut teen heroes, and a black maid who carries a voodoo doll and exclaims things like "Lawdy, lawdy!" It wasn't sodium that killed the beasts! It was clichés!

Horror of the Blood Monsters (1970) 85m

Mess by Al Adamson starts off with vampires attacking pedestrians in a modern-day city and then switches to a tedious space mission commanded by crotchety old John Carradine. Obviously he was only hired for a day or two because he never leaves the bridge of the ship. But at least this means that all his

scenes are in colour, because it turns out that the planet the ship makes a forced landing on is bathed in 'chromatic radiation', which filters all the light into one color. This phenomenon is rendered onto film by the process of 'Spectrum-X' and....say, wait a minute – you don't think Adamson just shot it all in black and white and *tinted* it, do you? Anyway, it turns out that the planet itself is inhabited by a tribe of prototypical vampires. Could this be the universal archetype propounded by Jung? When you consider that the most scientific explanation in the film consists of Robert Dix shining lights into his girlfriend's face, it doesn't seem likely. Instead, it's the Planet of Vampire Men as propounded by Adamson. Crew members of space mission rumble with vampire men, then go home. They hardly needed the talents of cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond on this one.

The House on Bare Mountain (1962) 61m

Nudie pic with a storyline. It's good for a couple of laughs due largely to the presence of Robert Cresse, who does a Jonathan Winters-style turn as an elderly lady in charge of a finishing school ("Granny Good's School for Good Girls"). Granny drinks like a fish and keeps a werewolf in the basement to guard her still. Film starts off well, then descends into the usual predictable, slow-paced gags. It picks up a little towards the end. Unlike several other films of the genre, the women in this one are all good-looking. Directed by Cresse's collaborator Lee Frost.

How to Make a Doll (1968) 81m

Low-budget bore from director Herschell Gordon Lewis, who should have learned How to Make a Movie instead. Alleged comedy has approximately two jokes in it, both dragged out beyond the tolerance levels of any normal human being. The first joke is: Nerdy professor and his mentor invent a machine that manufactures bikini-clad gals. Second joke: Nerdy professor exhausts himself making whoopee with the bikini-clad gals until he pulls the plug on the project. Biggest joke of movie is that it was directed by a man with a PhD. Film mostly takes place in one room. Electronic computer sound effects courtesy of some guy making funny noises into a microphone. Lewis employs his trademark comedic technique, which is to set up a scene that isn't funny and then keep filming until it stops being merely dull and becomes unbearable. He was probably still cranking the camera when they wrestled him to the ground.

If Footmen Tire You, What Will Horses Do? (1971) 52m

Scaremongering of the worst kind: financed by 'Babtists', as Joe Bob Briggs would call them, this rabid diatribe by Reverend Pirkle (this is a real person, not a Preston Sturges character) is mainly anti-communist, but ends up being anti-everything, basically espousing the notion that all good people should be spending their non-working hours praying or attending church (instead of sinful business like dancing, watching TV, or going to the drive-in). Using fear tactics that have been a standby of religion since the Dark Ages, Pirkle whips up a vivid portrait of Soviets invading the USA and killing everyone they see just for the hell of it. It's either hilarious or terrifying: hilarious to see awful, awful, awful acting (they were too busy going to church to learn to act), yet disturbing to think that once upon a time this was being shown to 'educate' congregations. As absurd as the propaganda is, it's worrying to think that viewers may have actually taken it seriously. Film would have surely disappeared into obscurity had it not been for its bucketloads of amateur gore effects, including torture and decapitation of women and children ("You won't be able to hear Jesus now!" one godless commie says after hammering chopsticks into a kid's ears), that ensured it a place in camp cult history.

The Immoral Mr Teas (1959) 63m

Russ Meyer's first feature made enough money to assure him a career in film-making. He makes the most of an otherwise dull genre – the nudie movie. Instead of a storyline, it has a concept: for the first half of the film we watch Mr Teas (actually Bill Teas, a friend of Meyer's) going through the routines of a working day, encountering many attractive women along the way. The second part of the film replays the events of the first, but this time Teas finds himself able to freely hallucinate and visualize each of the women naked. It's the kind of thing they

would have installed on nickelodeons at the turn of the century. You can see Meyer tipping a wink to the audience when the narration suddenly diverts from the images of women frolicking naked near a river and goes into a spiel about water transportation. Film is well photographed (especially considering it was made in less than a week) and predicts the editing style that Meyer would employ in his later work – although there are only so many shots of Teas fastening/re-fastening his bicycle case that one can take. Musical score is similarly annoying.

The Incredible Torture Show (1976) 88m

Show this to someone who doesn't watch horror movies. Count the days before they speak to you again. Film remains true to its gruesome premise from start to finish: Sardu, director of a fringe theatre company stages performances in which the players are graphically tortured before the audience. It's no act, which saves him the expense of paying his performers afterwards. But Sardu wants more than mindless bloodshed and cruelty: he wants to be appreciated as a serious artist. Hence his plan to kidnap a leading theatre critic and have him kicked to death in a new ballet he's writing. Film has many disturbing sequences, and much that is tasteless (i.e. one sick scene immediately after a woman is decapitated), but it's also permeated with loopy, off-the-wall moments that turn the violence into something absurd. In another context they could pass as television material for Monty Python. Still, it's not for the queasy, and many viewers will find the treatment of women thoroughly objectionable. Sean O'Brien steals the show as Sardu. With Louie de Jesus as an evil midget! And a cage of naked women!

Inseminoid (1980) 92m

Early *Alien* ripoff is pretty yukky. Judy Geeson is team member of colony on alien planet who, in the film's "highlight" is raped by a green neon tube. Oh, wait. Maybe the highlight is when another crew member hacks into his hand with an electric saw and they discover his frozen body....you get the idea. Even less Sci-Fi than the film that inspired it, this is cheap horror through and through. Limited budget means limited sets – nothing terribly high-tech here – so the crew members run from one corridor to the other for an hour and a half. Stephanie Beacham also stars in a pre-*Dynasty* role.

Invasion of the Blood Farmers (1972) 84m

Evil druid cult, still existing centuries after their apparent demise, kidnaps rural townsfolk and performs incomprehensible blood-transfusion experiments on them to find one who is capable of resurrecting their queen (whose body can be seen breathing visibly in a glass coffin). The police treat the occasional exploding drunk and missing honeymooners as something suspicious – or, as one TV bulletin better puts it "evidence of foul play could be found from one end of the blood-strewn room to the other". Nice girl Jenny can be targeted by audience fairly quickly as potential blood donor. But fortunately her boyfriend Don, who just happens to be a pathologist, is at work in her father's laboratory (kitchen table; microscope; beakers) to get to the bottom of these strange capers. Script: blah. Acting: blah (it actually gets *worse* as the film goes on). Gore: not nearly bloody enough. Least convincing dog corpse in cinema. Film's big climax is dubbed in its entirety even though the rest has been shot with mikes. The songs co-written by tunesmith A.J. Smut are heard in excerpt only.

It Conquered the World (1956) 71m

Lee van Cleef communicates with an alien and guides him to Earth, not noticing the moment when he slips from being the Alien's Friend and instead becomes the Alien's Collaborator. Lee thinks the alien, a large, barely-mobile root vegetable with a manic expression (it cost $200 to make), could provide the good folks of Earth with a few pointers to better living, the world being in the state it's in and all. His best friend and wife think otherwise. Picture isn't the least bit scary, and when the monster finally emerges from its cave it's just a joke. Story would have been better keeping the alien as a disembodied radio signal and working on some of the more interesting SF themes. You wouldn't pick Van Cleef for this role, but he handles it quite well.

It! The Terror From Beyond Space (1958) 69m

Interesting story, but frustrating budget, and script should have been reworked accordingly. Monster

gets on board space ship (conventional cigar-shaped rocket) while crew are footling about on Mars, then kills one of them on return trip to Earth. Premise is likened to 1979 SF/Horror milestone *Alien*, and even features a scene where the monster retreats into the crawlspace behind the wall. Story should work better than it does, as confined spaceship interiors (which give the crew no place to hide) don't demand a bigger budget. Nifty touch is that the alien works his way up from the ground floor, forcing the crew higher up into the ship. Not so nifty touch: original release in 3D with not much to exploit from the process other than the occasional blast of steam/smoke.

Jail Bait (1954) 70m

Urban crime drama from Edward D Wood isn't as bad as his other efforts and consequently not as entertaining. Who told him to write a coherent story?? Two men knock off the takings of a local theatre, killing the nightwatchman in the process. Simple story with predictable twist could have been told in half an hour. Least interesting of Wood's work, though his followers will still find charm. One satisfying moment of exploitation when Wood films a scantily-dressed young girl walking back and forth across a stage exhibiting the motion of her breasts to an enthusiastic audience. That's her whole act! Minimalist soundtrack from previous year's *Mesa of Lost Women* is heard playing throughout the film but is completely inappropriate here. No Bela Lugosi this time, but we do get Steve (Hercules) Reeves!

Jimmy, the Boy Wonder (1966) 69m

Not-in-the-least-bit-wonderful boy Jimmy Jaye says "I wish time would stop" one morning as he's being nagged to get ready for school. And hey presto! It does! Then Aurora, the daughter of an all-seeing magical astronomer, turns up in his bedroom and accompanies him on a quest to World's End to restore the magic globe back to the magic clock and get everything back to normal. Story sounds good, but imagine that you were given a camera and told to go to a park in Florida with a few giant flowers made out of craft paper and shoot the whole thing there. That's what Herschell Gordon Lewis, who knows no shame, decided to do. See!! Folks in the neighbourhood freeze when time comes to a stop (too bad the people in the background were still moving). Thrill!! To the amazing 'Slow Motion Land', where a bunch of kids play catch and go down slides...in slow motion! Barf!! As you listen to such show-stopping tunes as 'Beans' and 'Mr Fig', which sound like they were recorded in an empty school hall with the music teacher providing piano accompaniment. The characters keep panicking about how they have to complete their quest with all speed even though time has stopped and it wouldn't matter if they took five years or five minutes. Exercise in cheap can-do moviemaking wraps the live action around a 20-minute, terribly dubbed cartoon (also featuring a boy restoring a world stopped in time) which Lewis and associates got the distribution rights to. The end of the cartoon poses the question "Do you believe in magic?" The end of the film poses the question "Do you believe in crap?" The only kids' film worse than this is *The Magic Land of Mother Goose*. Guess who directed that one.

Jubilee (1978) 104m

Derek Jarman, who designed those terrific sets for Ken Russell's *The Devils*, tries his hand at a feature, mixing his usual cut-price locations and costumes with the underground music scene. It's the year of Britain's jubilee, and who should be walking about the streets but Queen Victoria, who has just time-warped in to see how the empire's been going all these years. She is, of course, totally bewildered by the profusion of punk, drugs, and Toyah Wilcox. Adam Ant and Little Nell (the singer with the squeaky voice in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) round off the cast. Victoria is not amused, but she's not as outraged as she should be either. Music, drugs, and Toyah Wilcox ensue. Some of it's pretty kinky. Competition you can have with friends: Can anyone remember film's plot a week later?

Keyholes Are For Peeping (1972) 70m

Doris Wishman comedy with only one flaw: it isn't funny. There is plenty of her usual voyeurism at hand, however. Jerry Lewis wannabe Samuel Petrillo plays a marriage counsellor who sets up shop in his apartment block, thus giving us plenty of opportunities to peek into the problems of married

couples therein. For good measure the janitor, Manuel (whose name is never pronounced correctly by any of the actors) happens to be an obsessive keyhole peeper. Apparently no-one told Petrillo about the low-key acting approach favoured in Wishman films, because he does enough for everybody, hamming it up for all he's worth. He probably knew ahead of time that this would be one of his only film assignments (an unamused Jerry had hamstrung his bookings). Stock music obviously tacked on, and grade of film keeps changing quality throughout. For some reason, all the mothers of male characters are played by men in drag.

Killer's Kiss (1955) 67m

After an uncertain debut with *Fear and Desire*, writer-director-producer-editor Stanley Kubrick returned to the more familiar territory of the New York streets. Taking a cue from his short documentary *Day of the Fight*, Kubrick has a boxer as his protagonist. Jamie Smith is about one fight away from retirement when he falls for his neighbour (Irene Kane), a dance hall girl who is later abducted by some hoods. This very simple story isn't much of an indication of the Master's later work, but it's interesting to watch him refining his craft and doggedly pursuing his film-making ambitions. Technically, the film is as good as any major studio production. Several passages rely on visuals more than dialogue, but the only moment of flair is when Smith and the Bad Guy slug it out in a storage room filled with mannequins. It was an odd choice to film a lengthy solo ballet sequence to accompany Kane's flashback voiceover – it sends the audience the message 'Kubrick knew someone who was a ballet dancer and put her in the film'. Some fuss was made about a scene in *Psycho* when its leading lady was shown wearing a black bra on screen in 1960; this movie had already done the same thing five years earlier. After this warm-up Kubrick made *The Killing* and never looked back.

Laserblast (1978) 80m

Cheap thrills from producer Charles Band, though with a few good touches. Boring core of story involves put-upon teenager Kim Milford stumbling upon a fancy-looking gun in the desert and blowing away all those nasty types that hassle him. Film's message: power corrupts. Deep. Eddie Deezen features in his usual talkative-nerd role, but apart from his small part and the stop-motion aliens, there isn't any other performance you'll remember afterwards. Laser effects unexciting. Nice looking car gratuitously destroyed. Milford's girlfriend (Cheryl Smith) does the usual oh-Billy-what's-happened-to-you emoting but never takes her clothes off, so we don't care.

Last Cannibal World (1978) 89m

Plane with four passengers crashes in uncharted jungle. Before you can say "I've seen this exact same story before" one of the unlucky group is attacked by cannibals. Hardy Ivan Rassimov gets captured by a primitive tribe (You can almost hear him thinking "Oh no....not again") and endures the usual hardships before making a run for it with local cutie Me Me Lay. Standard shots of animals eating other animals, heavy on the snakes this time. The savages are realistic – they live in an enormous grotto. Most extraordinary scene has Rassimov being stripped by the curious cave-dwellers, who then fondle his genitalia and hoist him up on a rope to see if he'll fly. More effective than some other cannibal pies because it doesn't bother with a plot – only two elements of story are capture and escape. It took three screenwriters to come up with this?

The Last House on the Left (1972) 85m

Hugely controversial in its time, Wes Craven's debut is too uneven and amateurish to make anyone think he would be capable of much more polished future work such as *Scream* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. It's supposed to be based on Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*. If it is, then there's no reason to watch this version. Film is pretty much made of three sections: the first shows two teenage girls meeting up with a bunch of crazies and is filmed in a fairly conventional manner; the second has a lingering, documentary feel and shows the abduction and murder of the two girls by said crazies; the third goes over the top with one girl's parents exacting revenge on their killers in a number of absurd ways. The actors do their own stunts, which means that one chases another around a living room with a chainsaw,

being careful not to make any contact! Many people find the humiliation and abuse of the girls the most repugnant feature of this film, when in fact the teeth-grating music and abysmal comic scenes by the local sheriff and his depitty are the real cause for vilification.

Laura (1979) 87m

One of David Hamilton's better coffee table books... er, films. Laura (Dawn Dunlap) is a gamine-like schoolgirl in the South of France (where else?) that attracts the eye of Paul, a local artist. Laura's mom (one-time Bond girl Maud Adams) takes a few nude snaps of her while outdated disco music plays in the background and Paul is all set to immortalise her in sculpture. But *zut alors!* He is dramatically blinded in a fire, meaning that the only way he can finish the sculpture is by giving Laura a damn good grope. Basic plot doesn't get in the way of the exploitation, but once again it's so demurely handled that it all comes across as antiseptic. Still, it doesn't have the irritations or meandering moments of other Hamilton films, and Dunlap comes across as an alternative to Nastassja Kinski, who was making films like *Stay as You Are* and *Passion Flower Hotel* around the same time.

Let Me Die A Woman (1978) 79m

You might want to warm up with *Glen or Glenda?* before copping this one. Voyeuristic documentary by Doris Wishman attempts to answer the question "Who, what and why are transsexuals?" Guaranteed to make you squirm: even better, watch with a group of friends and see who is the first to crack. Sex-change expert Dr Leo Waldman reads from cue cards so you get the impression even he's not sure what he's talking about. Includes interviews, simulated sex, group therapy sessions, detailed medical explanations, and (gulp) surgery. Main interviewee, a transsexual named "Leslie", is sympathetic and well-spoken – the only one to come off looking good in this film. Most ambiguous line: "I always felt like a woman, even when I had a penis". Surely the sentiments of easily-aroused males everywhere.

Lickerish Quartet (1970) 90m

Arty Radley Metzger flick looks more expensive than it should, thanks to location shooting in European mansions. Household of bored, decadent types watch porn film at home, then visit a local fairground and spot a girl who may have been one of the film's performers. They invite her back with them, and then...everything gets confusing. Film-within-a-film intrigues are convoluted by flashbacks, *déjà vu*, unclear character motivation, unclear characters. There is plenty of nude coupling going on – some of it is inventive (the library floor imprinted with words), some of it kitschy (outdoors among the sun-dappled trees), none of it really a turn-on. A little pretentious, but unique, and at least Metzger wasn't interested in aiming squarely for the exploitation end of the market.

Liquid Sky (1982) 112m

Oddball punk sci-fi will be disappointing to anyone expecting the special effects that the story outline suggests: miniature flying saucer, which looks like two Frisbees glued together, lands on the roof of a New York apartment building and shoots glass spears into the brains of anyone within range that is having sex. No-one is aware of the saucer except a scientist in the adjacent building who believes it is attracted by chemicals produced in the brain during orgasm. What a great excuse to include sex and violence in a story! Anne Carlisle is a model preparing for a fashion shoot – she also plays the part of her sneering boyfriend. Although set in the underground fashion/ nightclub/music scene, nothing is attractive. Her friends (particularly Paula Sheppard) are selfish, nihilistic, or vulgar. Dual role allows Carlisle to beat herself up. Indie Russian director Slava Tsukerman uses lots of artificial light and whooshy, mechanical music to help turn characters' environment into a place where a visiting alien wouldn't seem particularly noticeable.

The Little Shop of Horrors (1960) 70m

Call yourself a shoestring film-maker? Get on your knees in the presence of this man! Roger Corman finished the principal photography for this film in two and a half days! Thanks to a stage musical and the subsequent film remake, most people now are familiar with the plot: flower shop assistant Seymour

Krelboin (Jonathan Haze) nourishes a flesh-eating plant that gets bigger, develops vocal chords, and keeps demanding to be fed. A lesson in filmcraft – the editing and camerawork are models of efficiency. The speed of the production was probably good for the actors, too – they all appear lively and fresh. The chase scene at the end seems almost made up. Everyone hams it up, even the plant. Jack Nicholson is hilarious in a bit part as a masochistic dental patient, as is the *Dragnet*-style dialogue between cops. Filmed in glorious studio-bound black and white.

Lonesome Cowboys (1968) 110m

Scriptless alternative fare from Andy Warhol. No plot, just an idea: wouldn't it be fun to subvert macho cowboy types by presenting them variously as sex maniacs, gays, or drag queens? As the only woman in the cast, Viva has to put up with most of the indignities. At one point, after being molested on the grass, she looks genuinely pissed off. Similarly, another wrasslin' match between two half-dressed cowpokes crosses the line from acting to reality, prompting one nervous bystander to warn them about the dangerous-looking cacti all around them. This casual slippage between character/performer doesn't impede the film because the whole thing is extemporaneous from start to finish. Still boring, though.

Lorna (1964) 78m

Russ Meyer's first attempt at a 'straight' movie, or as straight as one can be in his universe, anyway. Model-turned-actress Lorna Maitland plays Lorna – not too much of a stretch so far – a buxom beauty who lives in a shack in the bayou while her husband Jim shovels salt for a living. Story takes place over the course of a day, with Jim labouring alongside his unlikable workmates while Lorna entertains an escaped convict. Tensions brew in both camps until everyone meets up for the final scene. Film is notable exception in Meyer's work in that only one female character is the object of attention – his usual complicated, farcical character relationships wouldn't have suited the more serious tone he was aiming for. This still doesn't explain his decision to include a fire-and-brimstone spouting preacher as narrator. Not as popular as his usual tongue-in-cheek sex'n'violence pies – it would have been interesting to see what direction Meyer might have been steered in if it were. Opening scene is gratuitously brutal. Great black and white photography.

Love Camp 7 (1968) 96m

Hallmark of sleazy concepts finds two female agents from the British military infiltrating a POW camp in occupied France to identify and liberate a valuable prisoner. But no ordinary camp, this. It is, as Commandant Bob Cresse likes to keep reminding everyone, "Love....Camp...Seven." One gets the impression that Cresse, the only cast member that even attempts to maintain a German accent, was getting paid for every time he managed to slip the film's title into his dialogue. The two plucky Britishers go along with the POW ruse by being stripped off, hosed down, strung up, suppressed, prostituted, humiliated, and generally abused. *Mise-en-scene* comprises: mounted machine gun, office, bunkroom, Doberman, military uniforms (loaned). Low-grade production values only add to slimy nature of film. Enterprise saved somewhat by Cresse who seems to be enjoying himself so much in his role that he sticks out from the others like a sore thumb and makes the whole thing impossible to take seriously. Twist ending can be spotted a mile away.

The Magic Land of Mother Goose (1967) 58m

Threaten your kids with this one if you want them to behave. Experimental, daring, avant-garde film-making was the inspiration for Bergman's filmed stage version of Mozart's *Magic Flute*. Not! It's mindboggling to think that some people must have actually paid money to watch this in a cinema – it's not even a film, just a childrens' stage entertainment put on by local thespians who decided they'd like someone to preserve their performance, and naturally turned to the Godfather of Gore, Herschell Gordon Lewis, to handle the task. The result is a bunch of actors prancing on and off stage. Cardboard characters discover chameleon-like powers against cardboard sets. Merlin, who has obviously fallen on hard times, performs conjuring tricks while others dance and sing. Lewis' sole contribution to directing is to put a camera on a tripod and record it all (surely

children in the cinema rioted and threw things at the screen before the first reel played out). Fairytale characters and classical music aren't copyrighted so there's no problem with budgeting on that front, but notice the way the name of a certain "Friendly Ghost" gets garbled to *Kahhrsparrghh* in post-processing. Character of Old King Cole provides film with its review in one line, "It's boring, it's a bore, nothing ever happens". Same character shares a dialogue with a balloon that talks by squeaking. It gives the best performance in a Lewis film to date. Game you can play with your family: Who can stay awake the longest?

Man from Deep River (1973) 90m

Early cannibal movie from Umberto Lenzi is just an excuse to string a lot of shockumentary-style footage around a slender plot. Ivan Rassimov is the Man from Deep River; Me Me Lay is the Girl from...River Deep, Mountain High? It's hard to tell but she seems to be a permanent resident of an unknown tribe that kidnaps Rassimov, who is out photographing an unexplored area "between" Burma and Thailand. His subsequent trials makes what Richard Harris went through in *A Man Called Horse* look like a frat pledge, but then he gets to make out with Me Me and decides it isn't so bad after all. Good location work, but only about three minutes of plot.

Manos, the Hands of Fate (1966) 74m

Truly one of the worst films ever made. Credit for that goes to writer/director/producer/actor/fertiliser-salesman Harold P. Warren. Warren plays Mike, who is driving across country with his wife Margaret, daughter Debbie, and poodle Pepe. They get lost and decide to stay the night at a 'house' – we only ever see the front door and one wall – in the middle of the desert ("I'm scared! It's getting dark!" Margaret pipes up, while it's still broad daylight). Highlights include: a five-woman catfight that goes on for several minutes without anyone actually striking or hurting each other; any scene featuring the incoherent, shambling performance of John Reynolds, who plays the servant of the house, 'Torgo', as if he was coked out of his head; the terrible pauses in dialogue that could have so easily been edited out; the boring delivery by everyone in the cast (even the dog can be seen yawning at one point); and scenes taking three minutes that should have taken less than one. It all ends up with Manos, the owner of the house, resurrecting himself in preparation to take another wife, unleash evil upon the world, etc etc etc. Great robes, Manos! A must-see.

Mars Needs Women (1967) 83m

Larry Buchanan's own favourite of a series of AIP movies he originally made for television. Five Martians appear on Earth, wearing those stock futuristic suits with the big V's on them, in order to steal five women who meet the right criteria (one condition is that they must be single!) and take them back to the home planet where the male-female ratio is 100:1. A lot of the film features the Martians stalking likely females, one of whom is TV's Batgirl, Yvonne Craig, here playing America's foremost authority on 'Space Medicine'. Before that we're treated to stock footage of jets flying back and forth. In colour! Head Martian Tommy Kirk discovers the Earth emotion Love while he and Craig sit in a planetarium watching yet more stock footage. Meanwhile girls get abducted and the newspaper headlines read 'Martians Strike Again!' Buchanan throws in quotes from literature and philosophy to class it up a little, but there's still plenty of choice bad dialogue throughout. Naturally the director was a little put out to find his film became a feature of Bad Movie festivals, but as he later conceded, it was better to have people enjoying it as camp rather than not watching it at all.

The Mask (1961) 83m

Director Julian Roffman got hold of a 3D camera but didn't have enough money to make a feature with it. His solution: make a standard 2D movie that includes short 3D sequences. His problem: audiences impatient with things like plot (especially 2D plot) when all they want to do is put on the glasses, already. The 3D turns out to be distracting, though the concept is great: when anyone in the film puts on a mask (part skull, part mirror ball) they are drawn into a world of maddening hallucinations. These are the instances where the audience must also don 'the mask', or 3D glasses, which effectively switches the

viewing experience from one world into another, just as is happening to the protagonist. The enjoyable 3D scenes are like something from European silent cinema. The rest is standard murder investigation and pseudo-scientific hokum.

Mesa of Lost Women (1952) 70m

Bewildering film appears as if it has been made up as it went along. This is beyond 'good' or 'bad'. It is simply 'there'. A light aircraft crashes into the Mesa, stranding its few passengers. We have to take their word that there is a Mesa, because most of what we see is impenetrable, inky blackness. It's almost as if the characters are trapped inside a nightmare – the presence of giant spiders, seen and unseen, add the right Freudian touch (they also turn out to be women – enough said). The basic piano-and-guitar score keeps playing in the background until it becomes hypnotic. Jackie Coogan plays a mad scientist conducting appropriately mad experiments. This is the wonderful sort of 'accidental' surrealism that can be achieved only on a shoestring budget by people who really don't know their craft.

Mondo Cane (1963) 105m

Cheerless viewing from director/compiler Gualtiero Jacopetti popularised the 'mondo' movie fad. Title translates as 'Dog World', as in dog-eat-dog. To perpetuate this particular metaphor, think 'cynic'. Documentary travels around the globe to show how bizarre we really are as a species. Although sparing us the excesses (i.e. animal slaughter, bodily mutilations) of later imitations, film is still objectionable. This is mainly due to the patronizing voice-over which mocks modern art, unusual rituals, and human beings in general. Particularly pathetic is the sight of near-alcoholics stumbling about in the early morning while the soundtrack plays variations on its syrupy signature tune, 'More'. Footage of cargo cults at film's end points the way to a more legitimate documentary style, but by then it's too late.

Mondo Erotico (1977) 80m

Laura Gemser's breasts host this tour-around-the-world of sex and sin, the rest of her being dubbed in somewhere else. You'd have to have the IQ of a hamster to believe that you were witnessing anything filmed outside of a cheap studio. At this point in the Mondo Movie craze film-makers weren't even trying that hard to disguise their staged routines, which in this case includes sex in a display window, on roller skates, in ancient rituals, and anywhere else you can find it. Gemser's narration, which sounds like it was handed in by a teenager trying to finish an essay the night before, is hilariously awful. At the end of the 'shocking' and 'scandalous' things we have seen she concludes that our trip around the stock footage of the world's hotspots has been "sad....but also fun!" and that "it proves the old saying, 'Everyone is different from everybody else in the whole world'". Oh, *that* old saying.

Mondo Topless (1967) 64m

You have to be either a breast fetishist or a diehard Russ Meyer fan to enjoy this one. Meyer capitalizes on the 'mondo' craze, which was getting stale about this time, to shoot breast footage that would top all his previous efforts. They come in all shapes and sizes, but there's only so much that Meyer can do with the concept of topless go-go dancers. He whip-pans from one dance routine to another (they all take place in natural settings) as well as intercutting performances from speciality acts. Usual fast cutting, low camera angles, fetishistic use of props (transistor radios, this time) and overblown narration. Lorna Maitland, star of Lorna, also makes an appearance. Shots of the seven featured dancers are accompanied by voice-overs, in which they talk about how they find their work liberating and enjoyable.

Mondo Trasho (1969) 95m

If this hadn't been made by John Waters it would have about as much interest as your neighbour's badly-dubbed home movie. Opening scene, in which three chickens are beheaded, has nothing to do with rest of story – it's clear than Water's agenda is all to do with effect. Story, which is way too long for a film like this, follows stars Mary Vivian Pearce and transvestite Divine through a series of weird encounters. No dialogue, but occasional voice-overs – as a lot of Divine's appeal comes from her/his huffy, often exasperated tone of voice, it's not nearly as amusing as later collaborations with Waters.

Production values non-existent – you can actually see the splices between edits. Waters raided someone's record collection (probably his own, since a lot of it is kitschy) and dubbed a non-stop, maddening musical soundtrack for accompaniment.

Monster a Go-Go (1965) 70m

This sort of thing must never be allowed to happen again. Herschell Gordon Lewis bought up some unused film featuring the then-tallest-man-in-the-world and added his own footage to create this unique waste of everybody's time. Astronaut lands on Earth in jettisoned capsule but is missing, presumed mutated. Uncharismatic characters wander about the story, get in and out of vehicles endlessly, sit around and talk, and are sometimes abandoned by the script at different points in the film. Dialogue is drenched in pseudo-scientific gobbledegook in sad attempt to explain story's *raison d'etre*. Not to be outdone by the crummy editing, acting, photography and sound, the musical score also reaches for the bottom of the barrel by ringing out the same few notes on guitars, keyboards and something that sounds like a fog horn. The Most Sober Narrator In The World persists in trying to make sense of the story. We never see an establishing shot of the tallest man in the world in relation to any other person or thing, so Lewis' whole concept is pointless. Oh, and there's no ending either.

Moonshine Mountain (1964) 94m

Singer/Guitar Picker leaves New York, goes to backwoods town in order to get to his musical roots with aim of writing some best-selling hits afterwards. Hillbilly hijinks include bashing a guy's skull in to get his coat, brewing up moonshine in a still the size of a water tower, throwing bodies in said still, killing a coupla guys by stomping on their faces, abducting/raping/killing the singer's girlfriend, etc. The surprising thing is that this isn't supposed to be a violent film, and is treated like an easy-going comedy with country music singalongs. What's not surprising is that it was directed by Mr Subtlety hisself, Herschell Gordon Lewis (who admits he 'ought to know better' in the opening credits). Leading man Chuck Scott has talent, and the film sets itself up as a bit of a lark from the get-go, so it's a touch above other HGL pies. The moonshine theme was picked up again in *This Stuff'll Kill Ya.*

Motor Psycho (1965) 74m

Three motorcyclists show up in a desert town – "those no-good bike-riding punks!" – harass good-looking women and their partners, and head off into the hills once one of them goes too far and kills a man. Alex Rocco – one of the few actors in a Russ Meyer film who would enjoy a career in the mainstream – takes off after them to see justice done. You can see parallels with the more well-realized *Faster, Pussycat!* in the opening scenes. A rare Meyer pic that is all action: the sex is relegated to second place. The whole thing has a kooky logic that is unique to Meyer films, never quite serious enough to be serious, not quite melodramatic enough to be funny. Final scene, in which psychotic motorcyclist pins down Rocco and his female companion with rifle fire, anticipates the ending of *Supervixens*. The exotic Haji provides the babe element.

Mud Honey (1965) 92m

Along with *Lorna*, this could well have marked a change in direction for Russ Meyer. In fact it once again stars Lorna Maitland who once again plays a character named Lorna. She's not alone this time – there are other female characters, and plenty of bubbling sexual tension. It's as if Meyer wanted to try making *Lorna* again using his more tried-and-true formula. Result is like Tennessee Williams on a bender. Ex-convict arrives in small Southern town, finds work as hired hand, observes intense relationships between Maitland, degenerate Hal Hopper, "naïve" Rena Horton, hypocritical Frank Bolger, etc, etc. Religion! Shotguns! Lynching! Appropriately, the climax involves a raging fire – we've seen the characters "hot" from the start. Sharp visual sense, great black and white photography. Princess Livingstone features as Maitland's mother – her raucous cackling will make you wince. Meyer's blend of drama, farce, exploitation, and action was rarely achieved more assuredly.

Multiple Maniacs (1970) 90m

Second feature by John Waters, the 'King of Sleaze' is supposedly a tribute to H. G. Lewis' *2000*

Maniacs, but it's hard to see any connection. Overweight transvestite Divine once again stars, this time the perpetrator of perversity and not the recipient (in subsequent films, she/he would be both). Film's funny opening features a group of degenerates operating a 'Cavalcade of Perversions' from a circus tent pitched in a park – from there the usual bizarre character relationships ensue, with everyone out to stab each other in the back (and front, this time). Waters' characters endure the kind of relationships that two rival kids' clubhouses might have. Finale is completely off-the-wall, but it seems that Waters built it around whatever props he had available ("Hey John, do you wanna trash this car before I send it to the wreckers?" "Hey John, got any use for a lobster costume?")

My Body Hungers (1968) 71m

Titillating title has little to do with the story, but would be appropriate for most other films by Joe Sarno. Gretchen Rudolph becomes a hostess in an out-of-the-way New England roadhouse to find the killer of her sister. A police lieutenant named Rod Loins (!) is also on the case. Roadhouse setting gives Sarno the opportunity to throw in nudity courtesy of awful burlesque dances – aren't they always? – and backrubs offstage. Characters keep eyeing each other suspiciously so that we don't forget this is a murder mystery. Eventually Rudolph and the lieutenant team up ("Is strangling people with lacy underthings a popular form of liquidation?" she asks earnestly). Film drags in spots but the final scenes just get (unintentionally) more hilarious as they go along. The non-stop jazzy soundtrack will drive you nuts. Film also features Olga and her Omphettes! And cinematography by Anthony Lover!

Naked...as Nature Intended (1961) 65m

...as long as Nature intended everyone to be (a) attractive young women, and (b) devoid of genitalia. Breasts-and-butts-only feature was early Brit entry into the Nudies. Audiences at the time must have been terribly frustrated, having to endure a travelogue that goes on for two-thirds of the film's length. Still, it heightens the anticipation of seeing the three leading ladies naked. Katrina, Jackie, and Pam embark upon a holiday which leads them through Stonehenge, Clovelly, Tintagel (a sign reads "To King Arthur's Castle and Beach"), Cornwall, and even Land's End, at which point you think they must surely stop and get on with the nudity, already. There they meet two "confirmed nudists" who show the gals how to have fun in the sun with only a beach ball. Once nude, the girls wave to each other a lot. The narration keeps reminding us how nudity is natural and nothing to be ashamed off while everyone on screen covers their crotches with towels. Naive charm of girls diminishes once you realize they have the intelligence of gnats. Other highlights: Nude ping pong. Shakespeare misquoted. Characters fall in water.

Naked Complex (1963) 64m

Excruciatingly bad in every way possible. Make it stop! This nudie flick scores a full house with its brainless writing, pathetic acting, bad dubbing, non-existent directing and lethargic wall-to-wall pop combo score. Eligible Bachelor (Roy Savage) has morbid fear of women so decides to escape society by flying a plane to the Caribbean and parachuting out over a deserted island (actually Florida's Sun Beach nudist club). After getting stuck in a tree and figuring he would never survive the six-foot drop to the ground, he screams for help until he is rescued by the island's sole inhabitants, who happen to be a group of naked women. What better way for him to confront his 'naked complex'? In a key banana-eating scene we see that Savage is eventually cured when he and the Head Nudist exchange psychotic-looking flirty glances with each other. Nothing much happens on the island, so the film reaches its absurd high point early on when Savage writes a long goodbye note and trails off into irrelevant reminiscences about judo, water-skiing, scuba diving, tennis ("My backstroke wasn't very good," he blathers erroneously) and golf. Directed by "Reymart". Man or shopping centre? You be the judge.

The Nasty Rabbit (1964) 85m

It doesn't look as if anyone was even trying in this one. Spies plan to unleash a deadly virus from a dude ranch in the U.S. and kill everybody. Counter-spies are everywhere trying to lay their hands on the virus,

which is attached to a collar being worn by a rabbit. Comedy by James Landis and Arch Hall has no legs and is a disappointing return to routine fodder after their previous flick *The Sadist*. Arch's son (you know the one) gets in on the act again doing his "I want to be a rock star, Dad" bit, playing the part of a teen-idol-cum-spy in search of the virus. So if he's an international touring teen idol then what's he doing playing dance music at a crummy dude ranch? If the bunny got on the loose and gave the characters cause to be falling over each other in some kind of farcical adventures for the duration, then there would be a point to the whole setup. In effect, the virus may as well have been left sitting on a table somewhere. Previous title was *Spies a Go Go*.

Night of the Ghouls (1960) 69m

What, no Bela Lugosi? Edward D. Wood Jr's usual cut-price horror flick, featuring characters walking back and forth around the same soundstage sets. There's more spooky goings-on at the old Willow Lake house (see *Bride of the Monster*), so a police lieutenant (Duke Moore) who sidelines as a ghost hunter investigates to see if it isn't all a scam perpetrated by self-professed medium Dr Acula (Kenne Duncan). Bela might be absent, but Wood regulars Tor Johnson, Paul Marco and Criswell are back to reprise their roles as Lobo, Patrolman Kelton, and Criswell. Film starts off promisingly bad with Criswell reading cue cards instead of memorising his lines and delivering a dreadful narration (which keeps hammering on the words 'horror' and 'terror') over a silly Juvenile Delinquency montage that has nothing to do with the rest of the movie. Otherwise it's kind of a drag, enlivened only by a phony seance routine incorporating a floating trumpet, swanee whistle and some guy under a white sheet. The laughs aren't as obvious in this picture but still sneak in through bad direction of the actors and extras (e.g. Criswell fussing around Dr Acula's coffin). As usual, Marco is supposed to be the comedy relief (from what? Boredom?) but the only laugh occurs unintentionally when Johnson strangles him and we get a glimpse of his toupee falling off (typically, Wood didn't bother to reshoot). One's heart goes out to the tenacious director, however, who couldn't afford to the pay the lab processing costs and never got the finished film back. The emerging cult of Wood's films decades later created enough interest to get it rediscovered and released in 1983, by which time Wood, Criswell, Moore and Duncan had long since passed away.

Night of the Living Dead (1968) 90m

All-time low budget classic, and for all the right reasons. Even though taken for granted today, George A. Romero's horror film was a huge departure from usual fright-fare of the time. With no name actors in the cast, it seems that everyone is expendable. Even main characters – or who narrative cinematic conventions would have us assume are the main characters – are scrubbed early in the film. Set almost entirely in one night, surreal storyline finds a group of strangers huddled together in an isolated farmhouse fending off corpses which have suddenly re-animated and become mindless cannibals. Like all good nightmares, there is no concrete explanation for the phenomenon; characters have no background (they only live in the moment); atmosphere is permeated with paranoia, fear, and claustrophobia. The characters do not offer heroic speeches or formulate means of destroying their enemy. Instead, they argue, panic, and hide. For once, a horror movie is peopled with ordinary folks, not military or scientific minds who have resources and knowledge at their disposal (in this respect it's very similar to the final scenes of 1963's *The Birds*). Made in Pittsburgh with a small crew and local television equipment. Romero's no-frills black and white photography adds to stark, visceral feel of the film. Unfortunately the movie ended up in the public domain and was subject to all kinds of horrors such as colourisation, shoddy video prints, and a hideous re-edited 'special edition'. It wasn't until a Romero-approved restoration was released decades later that horror fans finally got to see the film the way it was intended.

Night Tide (1961) 84m

Quirky little film by Curtis Harrington forms a bridge between his experimental work and mainstream features. It features Dennis Hopper as a sailor who meets a girl (Linda Lawson) working in a sideshow operating in a small coastal town. She masquerades

as a mermaid but the moody setting, carnival trimmings and inquisitive, unsure character of Hopper suggests that there may be more to Lawson than a fake tail. Stark black and white photography takes a leaf out of Dali's book by representing the surreal in broad daylight. Low budget also aids film: as this isn't a big studio production you're inclined to believe that the story can travel in any direction it wishes. Watch it late at night without distractions.

Nighthawks (1978) 113

Not to be confused with the Sylvester Stallone movie of the same name! With support from several gay organisations writer-director-producers Bob Peck and Paul Hallam created one of the earliest feature films to deal with homosexuality as an emergent lifestyle. Ken Robertson is a well-spoken teacher who maintains a nightlife completely separate from his daily social activities. We watch him attending several (real) nightclubs and parties in and around London, always on the lookout for one-night-stands or casual relationships until he lets things slip and, in a standout scene, has to declare himself openly to a classroom of teenagers. Much of the film has an improvisational/documentary feel, possibly inspired by the films of Ken Loach (Robertson mentions that he would like to show his class *Kes*, another film which features an improvisational Q & A session in a classroom). In lieu of famous names and stars, the directors use their small budget to create real, natural characters and conversations. Despite its underground genesis, film is surprisingly accessible in approach. It also needs editing – the repetitive nightclub scenes aren't interesting and are accompanied by the same annoying synthesiser music you'd expect from 80s direct-to-video porn.

Nude on the Moon (1962) 83m

Nudie flick by Doris Wishman tries to make the genre more exciting by relocating a nudist colony to the moon. Amazingly, the moon looks just like a park in Florida. William Mayer and Lester Brown are astronauts who build their own rocket (amazingly, their rocket looks just like the interior of a passenger jet), go to the moon, and take many photographs of semi-naked women. All for the cause of science, of course. Photography scenes take up much of the second half, and will test your patience with the fast-forward button. Not one single breast is seen to move, not even during the lethargic ball-tossing games that the moon people seem to enjoy so much. Title song, "Moon Doll", was written by Wishman's niece.

Nudist Paradise (1957) 67m

You'd swear, by the opening narration and chirpy musical score, that this movie is some kind of TV spoof by The Goodies for its first few minutes. Britain's first nudie movie is all done in the best possible taste with a stiff upper lip and even stiffer upper torsos (just try to spot one bouncing breast). Endorsed by the British Sunbather's Association, it looks more like a recruiting film for a religious cult. A secretary named Joan, who makes secret visits to a nudist club, is joined for one weekend of fun in the sun by co-worker Pat Beatty (there's a masturbation joke in there somewhere) who in turn is awakened to the joys of walking around without any clothes on, eating without clothes on, and playing sport without any clothes on (but is it really a good idea to be sitting naked in front of a roaring bonfire?). Highlight of weekend is apparently the Venus Competition, which the narrator tells us is "something to interest the members". It certainly won't interest any other part of your body, since it's the same drawn-out ordeal five times over, in which young girls strike different poses with mirrors, beach balls, and tennis racquets. The ever-present casually-flung towel ensures that nothing below the waist gets seen on screen. Movie is mostly presented as a lifestyle doco, although there are scripted interludes – the scene in which the two girls have a moonlight conversation could be transplanted into a horror movie prior to some sinister discovery or evil ritual. Naked virgin sacrifices, anyone?

Nurse Sherri (1978) 88m

A title like this is wasted on anything other than a porno film: in any case, the title character is absent from most of the film, and even her final appearance with meat cleavers in both hands is too late to save it. Religious nutcase has a cardiac arrest and dies in hospital; later that night Sherri (Jill Jacobsen) is attacked by animated green paint masquerading as

the film's chief special effect. Her doctor boyfriend and nursing colleagues try to unearth the reason for her strange behaviour. The few murders committed on screen are remarkably dull; other scenes plod along sluggishly; film looks like it was edited with the same cleavers that were used on Sherri's victims (the editors were the same two guys that wrote the screenplay). Performances are generally pretty good for a film of this type. Directed by Al Adamson.

One Million AC/DC (1969) 80m

One of too many dull soft-core sex films, of interest only because it was written (in five minutes, perhaps) by Ed Wood and has a cool title. Caveman has hots for wife of the Chief of the Tribe. Eventually he gets it on with her. Cave orgy ensues. Meanwhile, another female member of the tribe gets kidnapped by an ape, and an immobile, plastic toy dinosaur intimidates the tribe by roaring at their cave. There's no dialogue. Nor, apparently, any budget.

Orgy of the Dead (1965) 92m

Nearly unwatchable film will attract viewers because it was penned by Z-grade icon Ed Wood. It was supposedly based on a novel of his. If so, it was about ten pages long. The non-story starts off with a young couple having a car accident (the day/night continuity is just as bad as *Plan 9*, only this time it's in colour) and ending up in a nether world where TV psychic Criswell holds court over the souls of the recently dead. The couple are tied most inadequately to stakes and forced to watch – as are we – a succession of naked women perform dance routines to bland music. Hell doesn't get any worse than this. Not even Wood was going to handle the directing chores for this one. Acting is as bad as you could hope for, but there isn't enough of it. Director A. C. Stephens gets his money's worth out of the smoke machine.

Permanent Vacation (1980) 70m

Film School graduate Jim Jarmusch rightly figured that he wouldn't need a budget to film a character walking around the streets of New York and striking up conversations with people, so for 70 minutes Aloysius Parker (Chris Parker) glumly wanders about deserted areas of urban blight and encounters various types (some are strangers, some are known) who appear to be on a permanent vacation from reality. Bells keep tolling on the soundtrack along with barking dogs, helicopters, and other city noises until Parker escapes to the open sea to the tune of a sax riff repeating 'Over the Rainbow'. This is about as optimistic as the film gets. Jarmusch establishes his preferred themes and shooting style from his debut feature: hangdog conversational manner, dialogues that become monologues, static camera setups, and two characters sitting around with nothing better to do. Parker provides a self-analytical voice-over but doesn't reveal much about himself, the people he meets, or the place he lives in, which makes you wonder what the objective of this film is meant to be, other than as a 16mm rehearsal for bigger things to come. Fans of the director will probably work their way backwards through Jarmusch's catalogue to arrive here, and will know what to expect.

Pink Flamingos (1973) 95m

Apart from his later, more commercial studio efforts, this is the one John Waters film that most people appear to have seen – it's even enjoyed a wide-release 25th anniversary screening. Pretty much regarded as the benchmark for sleaze, story revolves around a contest for the title of 'Filthiest Person Alive' between transvestite Divine's family and a married couple called the Marbles. All actors will be recognizable to those familiar with Water's weird stock company. Film has much humour but also many repellent images – chickens being forced between two bodies during sex, Divine eating excrement fresh out of the dog (this isn't faked), and Edith Massey guzzling down scrambled eggs by the plateful. And who can forget the versatile singing anus? You can bet that audiences in 1973 weren't prepared to see Divine actually give oral sex on screen to another member of the cast. Film features Waters' costliest stunt to date, namely burning down a trailer. Consequently the whole process is filmed with great attention.

Plan Nine From Outer Space (1956) 79m

Popularly regarded as the flagbearer of all Z-grade movies and hailed as the worst film ever made. As anyone familiar with indie productions can tell you, this plainly isn't the case. There are countless worse

movies than this – they just happen to be less watchable. Those who have heard about Ed Wood's legendary opus may be disappointed: it might not live up to their anti-expectations. It has also been hyped so much now that it's near-impossible for a newcomer to see it without prejudice. Story involves efforts of visiting aliens to revive freshly-buried corpses and use them in their invasion of Earth. Oddball cast includes Bela Lugosi (in a piece of irrelevant home-movie footage), Criswell the psychic (whose melodramatic delivery is hilarious), Vampira and Swedish wrestler Tor Johnson. With that lot, who needs aliens? Film's cult is due to its cheap sets, absurd dialogue, and most famously, Wood's decision to replace the prematurely-deceased Lugosi with a stand-in that looks nothing like him. You'll laugh at first, but after watching it for the third time – are you game? – you'll begin to appreciate picture's charm: the photography is pretty good, the actors are enthusiastic, and you have to give Wood credit for improvising and trying to make a film that was clearly beyond his means. Documentary about the making of the movie, *Flying Saucers Over Hollywood*, is actually longer than the film itself.

Psyched by the 4D Witch (1972) 85m

An unendurable hour and a half that anybody could have filmed around the neighbourhood with an 8mm camera. Cindy is cute girl-next-door type who likes to practice her 'sexual candle ritual' to open the door to 'sexual witchcraft'. She channels Abigail, a 'sexual witch' (spotting a theme yet?) from the past who takes Cindy on a number of erotic adventures. Writer-Director-Everybody Victor Luminera makes Herschell Gordon Lewis look like Cecil B. DeMille. Entire soundtrack is dubbed with voiceovers (under the pretext that the characters don't need to talk because they can communicate telepathically) and a terrible hack-and-paste score recorded off an album of popular classics. The one original song, 'Beware of the 4D Witch' is played *ad infinitum* to footage of (a) coloured lights and smoke, and (b) people walking around the streets, the school, the park, or wherever else Luminera took his camera. Amazingly, not only does nothing happen during a lot of the running time but it's also recorded on film. Entertain yourself counting Cindy's untended blemishes during her numerous extreme close-ups. The terrible dialogue is probably only fanny if you're watching with an audience. Filmed in Transetheric Vision, whatever the hell that is.

Primitive Love (1964) 83m

Jayne Mansfield had been leaving her Hollywood career further and further behind with European flicks and B-grade exploitation, but after appearing topless for *Promises! Promises!* and making this quasi-mondo movie she proved she had reached the point of no return. Jayne plays a researcher who has travelled the world to find love in primitive societies (i.e. anywhere but the Western world) and shares her discoveries with a professor by showing him an 8mm film in her hotel room. The documentary is not nearly enough footage (even including the faked stuff) to pad out a feature, so a good deal of tomfoolery is provided by two horny hotel porters played by Italian comedy duo Ciccio and Franco. They're about as funny as tuberculosis. Jayne's fidgety doco includes an unfaithful woman being pelted with eggs, another's infidelity being tested by the bite of a python (which kill by constricting instead of biting, but never mind), another being seduced by a man under instructions of an owl (which has been dubbed with a parakeet, but never mind) and the unnecessary on-screen killing of a pig. Professor remains skeptical of film's conclusions; however Jayne convinces him of her anthropological argument by doing a striptease and turning him into a drooling idiot.

Rat Pfink a Boo Boo (1965) 72m

Made on a budget befitting your average 8mm home movie (the guy who did the title spelled it wrong and they didn't bother to film it again), this Ray Dennis Steckler production changes concept halfway trough. It starts out as a thriller, with a girl being terrorised by two thugs. Steckler figured he'd already done this before with *The Thrill Killers*, so decided to make a different movie for the second half. Suddenly the two protagonists turn into Rat Pfink and Boo Boo (supposedly spoofs of Batman and Robin), who then fight crime and defend justice by embarking upon the most drawn-out, boringly filmed car chase you've ever seen on film (put camera in front seat; turn on

camera; leave camera running). The whimsical change of genre would have been more effective if we weren't alerted to the existence of R & B earlier in the movie. Routine rock'n'roll numbers pad out the movie. They don't help. Visuals switch between black & white and tints, further adding to film's patchiness.

The Rats are Coming! The Werewolves are Here! (1972) 91m

The authenticity of Andy Milligan's no-budget 19th Century opus is blown right from the first minute when a couple of rascals in home-made period attire pull out a gasoline can in order to start a fire. If it weren't for references post-Jules Verne and pre-Wright Brothers, there would be no way of knowing when Milligan's story was supposed to be taking place, but anyone familiar with the Staten Island director's careless approach to his craft won't find this any surprise. Family of werewolves, who just happened to be named Mooney, welcome home their daughter who has been studying medicine for four years. Cast, which appears to have been collected from a local playhouse, talks and talks and talks – sample dialogue: "Did she say anything to you about anything" – until the promised werewolves of the title show up in the last five minutes, run about gibbering, and then all get shot dead. Lycanthrope affect achieved by actors sticking some fur on their faces and snarling in fog that instantly appears from nowhere, both outside and inside the house! Irrelevant rat-buying scene thrown in to capitalize on the previous year's *Willard*. Most absurd bit has a disfigured pet shop owner saying that rats ate his arm and half his face while he was asleep! Death throes of a chicken dubbed by actor going "Squawk squawk squawk arggghhh! Squawk squawk arrghh!"

Santa Claus Conquers the Martians (1964) 81m

Always included in bad-movie compilations. Green kids on Mars are feeling blue, so the Martian king kidnaps Santa Claus and puts him to work in a toyshop. Santa's presence causes a little friction. Theme song, "Hooray for Santy Claus" is the best opening title music since "Beware the Blob". Stock footage of air force fails to excite. You want more? How about nine-year-old Pia Zadora with her face painted green? Not as easy to laugh at as you may think, as one must remember that the film was intended for children, not adults, and it really isn't that interesting, despite its camp elements. If Dr Seuss had stuck his name on it, critics would be calling it a classic. It still is, in a way. Awarded Golden Turkey status, when in fact it should be Christmas Turkey.

Satan's Sadists (1969) 86m

The way Russ Tamblyn keeps his hat brim pulled right down to his nose suggest that he was a little reluctant to be involved in this Al Adamson production. Despite suggestion of title, this is not yet-another-devil-worship film. Instead, it is yet-another-wild-bikers film. John (Gary Kent) and Traci (Jackie Taylor) are a young couple that meet by chance while fleeing from the eponymous bikers, who can't seem to encounter any other human beings without raping them, killing them, or beating them up. Luckily, ex-marine Kent has the training to even the odds with his lethal handling of a knife, snake, and toilet bowl. There's a pretty good film in here – Adamson handles several plot turns and action scenes well. Unfortunately, it's undermined by irrational violence, which fortunately is undermined in turn by unintentional laughs, most of which come from Tamblyn's hopeless would-be girlfriend (Adamson's wife Regina Carrol). Tamblyn's soft-spoken delivery comes off a little like Adam Roarke, another biker-movie player, but that might have been his motivation: "Russ, pretend you're another actor in a better movie".

Schlock (1971) 77m

First outing by fledgling director John Landis laid the groundwork for the goofy comic style he would become famous for. Plot is similar to Joan Crawford film *Trog* from the previous year. Trog=troglodyte so Schlock=schlockthropus, a primitive apeman revived in 20th Century LA. Slight plot connected by gags/set pieces. Humour doesn't always come off (probably a consequence of film's two-week shooting schedule!) but there are some funny moments. What's most amusing is that Landis, who plays Schlock, doesn't even make any effort to move

like an ape – he just walks about casually like a man in an ape suit. This effectively gives Schlock the persona of a silent comic in the Chaplin/Keaton mould. Very low-budget, but enthusiastic. Film also marks somewhat historical collaboration of Landis and make-up wiz Rick Baker, who would win the first Oscar for f/x makeup ten years later with Landis' ground-breaking *An American Werewolf in London*.

Scream of the Butterfly (1965) 75m

"Oh God! God! Let me die!" "Don't say that, Marla! You hafta live!" Probably the silliest sequence in what is otherwise a well-written movie. If not for a couple of nude scenes it could easily pass as some studio's B-pic. A public defender, counsellor, and assistant DA gather to discuss what seems to be an open-and-shut case of murder. Piecing together what they know of the final last days of the murderer and his victim (who is referred to as "Miss Slutsy-Wutsy" at one point!) they realize there is more going on than meets the eye. First hour of film is routine husband/wife/lover intrigue, but last fifteen minutes adds a fourth corner to the triangle and gives it a little edge. Photographed by director-to-be Ray Dennis Steckler.

Scum of the Earth (1963) 85m

No, not murderers or rapists, but photographers who trick young women into taking off their bikini tops (the scum!). Innocent-girl-led-astray flick tries for titillating subject matter – with a strong moral stance, of course – but is stymied by complete lack of nudity. Probably just as well, as that would have made director Herschell Gordon Lewis a hypocrite now, wouldn't it? Of course Lewis started out with nudies and graduated into explicit gore. This one appears to be marking time in between. Acting is OK in a couple of key roles.

Sex Kittens Go To College (1960) 93m

There's little that's funny in this campus comedy. Mamie van Doren plays a new addition to the teaching staff: it's supposed to be amusing that she's not just some dumb blonde but a genius. As mumbo-jumbo script was not written by a genius and Mamie's delivery plainly betrays that she does not have a clue what she's talking about, it's pretty dire. Plot involves somnambulist inventor whose robot is making a killing on the track, attracting attention of armed thugs. Cheap-looking Albert Zugsmith production is notable only for the truly unexpected finale, which has nothing to do with the rest of the story: a parade of strippers do their routines before the 'dreaming' robot. The nudity is jarring – how did Zugsmith get away with this, and where did he think this film was going to be shown?

Shadows (1959) 81m

John Cassavetes' first film, and his second – after the premiere screening he reshot more than half of it and threw out the rest, though the long-lost first version did come to light forty years later. Financed from acting turns in other director's movies, his debut is a remarkably mature departure from the usual box office fare of the time. There's no real story, just motivation, situation, background, and relationship spaces for the actors to explore in Beat-era New York (the jazz score enforces the film's improvisational attitude). This is exciting stuff for the time, more interesting from the point of view of film history than viewing for enjoyment's sake. Even though it's an actor-driven piece, Cassavetes shows confidence and skill technically. Its craftsmanship belies the low budget. Acting sometimes stumbles – it looks at times as if the cast provoke each other or act unpredictably just for the sake of giving someone else something to bounce off.

She-Demons (1958) 77m

Tod Griffin and Irish McCalla are among a small band of travelers who end up on a tropical island and stumble upon Nazis hiding in the jungle, whose uniforms have held up pretty well a decade after the war, considering they don't appear to have anything else to wear. Evil Head Scientist (Rudolph Anders) is doing the usual inhuman experiments on convenient bevy of caged women to find a way to restore the beauty of his disfigured wife. Nazi ingenuity: his lab equipment is powered by lava. Former experimental subjects transform into 'she-demons' by special cinematic process of applying papier-mache masks to their faces. Usual caged-women revolt, lab-in-destruction, etc,. Characters strictly one-dimensional

with exception of scientist's wife, who is a little sympathetic, at least.

She-Devils on Wheels (1968) 83m

Low-rent biker flick doesn't get much better than its crudely-drawn opening titles but has a twist – the gang are all girls. However, despite promising concept, film doesn't work (three words: Herschell Gordon Lewis). It's unusual to see him working with a cast of female protagonists for a change, though they're just as anti-charismatic as his usual male ensembles (they were picked for their cycle-riding ability, not their acting). It was a big money earner for Lewis at the time. Tough girl gang shows wild side of life to a newcomer, including gang fights (one original touch when the victorious girls urinate over a half-conscious victim) and swinging parties (where the girls line up the guys like a meat market and pick out who they want). Film is pretty lousy but at least has tough female characters. Ending, in which the gals set up a lethal booby trap for a rival gang member, suggests that Lewis was pining for the good old days when he was dismembering people for the camera.

The Sinful Dwarf (1973) 75m

Dwarf of title lives in a seedy former nightclub, now boarding house, with his hard-drinking ex-cabaret performer mother. Together they kidnap and drug young girls who they keep in the attic for sex. Your standard sinful dwarf plot, really. Sleazy film is too professionally made to be classed as a true Z-Grader but fits the bill in every other department. Most laughs come from the gibbering, giggling, lascivious Olaf (the dwarf) and the amazingly bland young newlywed Mary ("I've got to get the police, and I must go at once," she exclaims to herself, pausing only to change her outfit and then loiter in the attic on the offchance that someone might catch her there). Lots of important symbolism, folks. Note the cane that becomes undersized Olaf's penis substitute when he defiles the helpless Mary. Note the constant intercuts of toys under the guise of a Greek chorus. Note the mouse in the teabags (it has to mean something, doesn't it?). The musical score is pretty good.

The Single Girls (1974) 83m

A group of men and women go to an island hideaway to participate in encounter sessions and find anyone who will have sex with them. Obviously this is how Club Med started. Exploitation team Ferd and Beverley Sebastian, who pay more attention to plot than most other entrepreneurs of the genre, throw a demented killer into the story and one by one characters get knocked off. Claudia Jennings stars, but shows nothing that suggests her status as a B-movie cult favourite, and is less memorable than some of her female co-stars, one of whom declares that she fantasizes about being attacked at night, tied up and having her clothes ripped off. The best possible thing to say aloud within earshot of a potentially lurking homicidal maniac. Some of the build-ups to the murders pretty much form the basis of the stalk-and-slash films that boomed in the late 70s and early 80s. It's not bad, but full of the usual dumb lines and second-rate performances.

The Sinister Urge (1961) 71m

Ed Wood's last completed feature. Nudie photographs and tame S&M flicks are inspiring a psycho, "Dirk", (he carries a knife – get it?) to kill pretty women in the park. Films message: titillating pictures are evil! Or, as stated by the police in the story: "You know what pictures like this can cause? Sex maniac headlines!" As prophesied, we are later witness to the dramatic headline 'Another Sex Maniac Murder!' This overwrought tract against soft-core porn would be easier to take if we didn't already know that Wood didn't mean a word of it – he later ended up writing sex novels and porno films of his own. Film is slicker and less juvenile than earlier Wood efforts but is still weakened by broad characters and crummy dialogue – the exchange between police officers over a dead body in the park would be offensive if it wasn't so stupid. Watch this as a double feature with H.G. Lewis' *Scum of the Earth*. Note the posters for Wood's *Jail Bait*, *The Violent Years*, and *Bride of the Monster* in the porn director's office.

Sinthia, the Devil's Doll (1968) 77m

Ridiculous 'arthouse' picture by Ray Dennis Steckler, who used a Swedish name on the credits in

the feeble hope that it might be taken seriously. Shula Roan stars as Sinthia (note the spelling, folks), who walks in on her parents having sex and reacts the way any normal person would: by stabbing them both to death and setting the house on fire. You know you're in trouble when this is the only part of the movie that makes sense. The rest is a collage of images and dialogue inspired by the turmoil in Sinthia's head as she tries to get on with her life and put those pesky incidents of parricide and arson behind her. Film strives for mood, but is too self-conscious for its own good. It'll remind you of those phoney, pretentious productions scripted and performed by fringe theatre companies, where coherence and meaning is sacrificed for effect and a highly specious representation of 'art'. Visually, it's the most interesting of Steckler's work. In every other department, it's a bust.

Slave of the Cannibal God (1978) 97m

Cannibal flick has the benefit of bigger stars than usual (Ursula Andress and Stacy Keach) but not much else. Andress is in search of her father who, it turns out, has become a deity to a tribe of primitives living deep in the heart of the New Guinea jungle. The smart primitives immediately adopt Andress as one of their own because part of the initiation ceremony involves stripping naked and getting painted gold, as is usually the practice in these movies. Do Italian directors know something that ethnographers don't? Most of the story is taken up with the journey to the mystic mountain. Escape by Andress and Keach at film's end is pretty good.

The Slime People (1962) 76m

Not a film about tabloid journalists, but monsters that attack Los Angeles from the sewers. Monster-fighting hero (and romantic lead) Robert Hutton flies in from the coast and sees that everyone is gone except for monster-fighting scientist and his two nubile daughters. The monsters have surrounded the state with an impenetrable Wall of Fog (where's a 5th level Magic User when you need one?) leaving the monster-fighting quartet to solve the problem all by themselves (where's Scooby Doo when you need him?). Another clean-cut young guy turns up to balance out the boy-girl ratio. Stupid dialogue, stupid acting, stupid everything. The actors sit in stationary cars that are supposed to be moving (the director stuffs the back seat full of junk so we can't see out of the rear window and discover this clever ruse). The slime monsters are killed by sodium chloride, which is just salt, but sodium chloride sounds more scientific.

Snuff (1976) 77m

Yes, you've all heard about it, and no, it's not real. It's hard to believe the controversy surrounding this film ever managed to propagate – the gore effects that conclude the story (the movie's selling point was that the lead actress was murdered on film by the director and crew after the final scene) are so lame that you'd think the opening night audience would have told everyone else not to waste their time. We're talking bright red paint, fake finger amputation, fake buzzsaw-through-the arm, and sheep entrails. Actress plays dead convincingly enough: doesn't blink. Preceding 70 minutes of sloppily filmed story recount escapades of a group of women instructed by their satanic mentor to go on a rampage similar to the Sharon Tate murders. The lazy dubbing will have you thinking it's just another cheap South American import shipped in for American audiences, but actually it was filmed in English by producers who put zero effort into the post-production (one scene, in which the gals frolic in a lake, is obviously recorded in a bathroom with someone sloshing a tub of water). The laughable argument between a wealthy estate owner and his visitor (in which they call each other butchers, nazis, jackals) is the film's only likely bright spot. Exploitation film-makers Michael and Roberta Findlay were responsible for the original product (called *Slaughter*); small-time producer Allan Shackleton had the idea of tacking on the 'snuff' ending and starting speculation that it was real.

Some Like it Violent (1968) 69m

Roughie from the 60s has so much stripping in it that it might as well have been a nudie – at one point a girl takes off all her clothes just to make a phone call! Perhaps it was a bold experiment to combine the two genres. Crime boss Johnny Scaro has his prostitution racket closed down so decides to rebuild it using a

computer dating service owned by a sweet little old lady. Scaro and his gang are the ultimate screen tough guys – they walk around almost paralysed with rage, snarling and snapping at everyone, including each other (when one of them makes a casual exit the actor mispronounces "ciao" as "cow"). Film's dialogue is so hardboiled it's hilarious, especially when spoken by Frankie the Shiv, who has an extremely distracting moustache (it looks like a toilet brush). In fact all of film's characters seem to belong to another universe.

Something Weird (1968) 80m

Somethin' Stupid. Hard Hat by name of Mitchell gets massive electric shock and becomes clairvoyant as a result (remember that the next time you stick a knife in a toaster). After being released from a hospital where the nurse's idea of bedside manner is "A freak like you should have died", Mitchell is approached by a cackling cartoon-like witch who can restore his "pretty face" and strengthen his ESP in return for some good lovin'. He puts his newfound powers to practical use by exorcising a church, doing party tricks, and hunting a serial killer. At least Herschel Gordon Lewis' muddled movie isn't as predictably dull as his gore films, but it's just as terribly acted (the Oscars go to 'Dr Jordan' and 'The Hag') and unapologetically cheap. Story's highest low point occurs when one character has a life-and-death struggle with his bedsheet, which we are supposed to believe is trying to kill him. Mitchell takes LSD to increase his ESP (never mix your abbreviations, kids) and has a five-minute trip through a red filter. What's interesting is how much of the film predates Stephen King's bestselling novel *The Dead Zone*, which also features a man who gains clairvoyant powers after an accident, assists police to find a serial killer, and is shot dead in the finale. Film's biggest claim to fame is having its title appropriated by the video distribution company of the same name.

Spider Baby (1964) 81m

Lon Chaney Jr might have been slumming it in this cheapie, but his restrained, affable manner still manages to out-act the rest of the Z-grade cast. He's a chauffeur who lives on his late master's crumbling estate so he can keep an eye on his unhinged offspring, including one fetching girl named Virginia who has a spider fixation. It turns into one of those 'spend the night in a creepy house' pictures and doesn't live up to the entertaining awfulness of its Bobby Pickett style opening theme song (which sounds like Mister Magoo on acid), but there are a couple of nifty scenes and a great final reel full of unpredictable moments. Best of all is Quinn K. Redeker, who has to be the most cheerfully naïve hero this side of Poverty Row (he's the only one at the dinner table enthusiastic about a spread of mutilated meat, slop, and a salad made of a bowlful of weeds). It's not until Virginia has bound him to a chair and is draping herself all over him that his expression finally changes to one of...uncertainty! Shot in under two weeks by exploitation fave Jack Hill (his debut).

Strange Rampage (1967) 60m

Four girls take their clothes off. What's the excuse this time? Framing device has a psychoanalyst telling us about a few of his more lewd case histories. One has a secretary that shares an "intense daydream" with a teacher (we know she's a teacher because she's sitting in front of a blackboard with DOG, CAT and 3+3=6 written on it); another has an exhibitionist who seems to spend every waking minute pulling her clothes off (the doc prescribes a job as a stripper) and the conclusion features a girl who tries to get satisfaction from a mannequin because her standards in men are too high. There's no live sound apart from the linking commentaries from the good doctor, and no effort has been made with the post-synched soundtrack (a man springs up to answer a door before the knock sounds on it). Be warned – this film contains "preliminary hanky-panky".

Suburban Roulette (1967) 80m

Herschell Gordon Lewis picture, probably inspired by the sex-in-the-suburbs films of Joe Sarno. Three married couples find life in the suburbs pretty boring, so soon they're coming on to each other, having key parties, strip poker, wife-swapping...all the usual things that happen in suburbia. Limited location space works in favour of storyline. The homes are bland and soulless – you can understand how anyone could be bored with such a lifestyle. Dialogue,

acting, and character conflict is also better than most Lewis flicks. He shouldn't have set up the opening as if this was a sex comedy. Worst thing in movie is the 'roulette' narration, which exhausts the metaphor to the nth degree.

Supervixens (1975) 106m

Hi-octane Russ Meyer films is one of his most demented – it's an ideal introduction to anyone unfamiliar with his work, because all the trademarks are there: large-breasted women, flashy editing, wild confrontations, sex, humor, and violence (which in this case is offputting). Every girl's name is prefixed with 'Super', perhaps Meyer's acknowledgement of his leading ladies' dimensions. Charles Napier plays a cop who, in the film's most unsettling sequence, kills another man's bitchy wife. The wrongfully accused hubby takes off into the desert, meeting a number of sexually uninhibited women along the way – finally he settles for the owner of a diner who looks exactly like his wife (Shari Eubank plays both parts). Napier, who has obviously been out in the desert sun too long, then comes after the young couple with dynamite and a shotgun. Wild final scene is classic Meyer.

Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song (1971) 97m

There is a reason they don't make films like this in the mainstream: they suck. Because of its inflammatory depiction of whites and blacks in contemporary America, Melvin Van Peebles' personal project has been hailed as a social milestone of sorts, but it is exploitation, plain and simple. Peebles plays Sweetback, a taciturn stud raised in brothels, who goes on the run after beating up two cops. He has sex with most of the women he encounters while the police force, all made up of white sadistic thugs, chase him fruitlessly. Peebles' agenda would be irresponsible if the film itself wasn't so uninvolving: the acting is second-rate, there's no story, and Sweetback runs across country more than Forrest Gump. Peebles, who had already directed more polished features, seemed hellbent on making Sweetback as dirtily 'underground' as possible, filling it with amateurish camerawork (lens flares, smash zooms, bad lighting, shaky hand-held shots) and a persistent soundtrack (with a lot of jamming by Earth, Wind & Fire). First half of the film has many scenes that undoubtedly startled, shocked, or repulsed viewers at the time, but without a plot to hang them on they come across as gratuitous effects. In spite of all this, the film still did big business at the box office, thanks to its graphic (and interracial) sex scenes.

Tanya's Island (1980) 90m

Model D D Winters (aka Vanity, one-time girlfriend of pop star Prince) fantasises about life on a deserted island with her boyfriend. She mustn't think him much cop, because shortly an ape enters the scenario, whose company she obviously prefers. Incensed boyfriend throws a series of petulant fits – he's one of the biggest jerks you've seen on screen – and reveals a talent for rapidly constructing entire buildings out of bamboo that would put MacGyver to shame. Only character that doesn't sulk and shout is the ape. The whole film doesn't seem to know what its purpose is. Dialogue and behaviour of characters is hilarious. Not one, but two makeup geniuses designed the apeman – Rob Bottin and Rick Baker.

The Tempest (1979) 95m

Economical Shakespeare by Derek Jarman. Probably the one play by the Bard that has the most visual potential for a cinematic retelling, yet one of the least filmed. Jarman collects together an interesting bunch of characters, but the performances aren't anything memorable. His decision to mix the old with the new (as he would do to more interesting effect in *Caravaggio*) comes across as frivolous; best moments are arguably when he goes over the top (e.g. sailors providing a cheesy *faux*-HoIlywood musical finale).

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974) 87m

Hugely successful horror film launched Texas film-maker Tobe Hooper's career and earned him a cult following. While scary and unrelenting, it's made with talent and suggests far more than it shows. That doesn't mean it isn't gruesome. A young group of travellers drive through the backroads of Texas and have the misfortune to run into a crazed family. Cue the title! The terrified characters are out of their

minds with fear, and with good reason: this is a living nightmare where masked killers chase you through the woods; no-one can be trusted; the daylight is dim and night seems unending; the only buildings are run-down or cluttered with bones and debris. As is often the case with such films, the low budget and makeshift set dressing contributes a raw realism not found in glossy studio pies. A good example of independent film-making, though several of the cast didn't come to share Hooper's enthusiasm by the time they'd been dragged through the mill. What do you mean, 'stunt doubles'? This is art!! Drive-In critic Joe Bob Briggs cites this as his favourite movie.

They Saved Hitler's Brain (1963) 81m

Too bad they didn't save some more footage while they were at it. Film started in the 50s and would have still made sense if it had been left alone, but UCLA students in the 60s bumped up the running time by adding extra scenes with new characters (who disappear or get killed, leaving the rest of the movie for everyone in the original story) to secure a distribution deal for exploitation peddlers Crown International. Not only did they edit in car crash footage from another film, but had the gall to filch Robert Mitchum's climactic crash from *Thunder Road*. Core of story: girl is kidnapped by neo-Nazis to lure scientist father to Mandoras in order to extract antidote of the deadly G-Gas (that's not a stutter) that they are planning to unleash upon the world as per the instructions of Hitler's head (or as they urbanely refer to him, 'Mr H') which has been kept in a jar since WWII. New scenes are easily the worst of the picture in regards to acting, dialogue and music; they'd be sufficient to earn the picture its camp status without the extant footage of the Fuhrer's evilly smirking noggin, which unfortunately doesn't get enough screen time. Film's highlights occur every time someone gets shot, which is always unintentionally funny, either during or after.

This Stuff'll Kill Ya! (1971) 75m

Excruciating Herschell Gordon Lewis film about that ole devil moonshine likker, and the strife it causes in a small community. Why didn't he stick to horror? Maybe he did: the film is horrible. Lack of rehearsals and retakes evident in the way the camera keeps missing people when they go out of frame. Crummy visuals complemented by inaudible sound from wind blowing directly into the microphone. On the plus side, this makes it harder to hear the awful dialogue. One good dirty joke, when the congregation sings the bridal march at a wedding. This stuff won't kill ya, but it will bore you senseless. Enough to drive you to drink.

Three on a Meat Hook (1973) 80m

You'd think that 1973 would be a bit late to jump on the *Psycho* bandwagon, but there's life in the old paranoid schizophrenia sub-genre yet. Billie (Charles Kissinger) is a loner living with his father in a house on the outskirts of town – the only guests they have are travellers that don't stay too long. Billie meets a girl in town, and straight away there's trouble, 'cause as his father is wont to remind him, he's got a troubled past. Usual twists, but there is one sudden, violent sequence that you'll remember long after you've forgotten the rest of the film. Much of film is quite slow (we have to listen to a band play through a whole musical number at one point, prompting speculation that they were they friends of the producer) and derivative. Nothing special. You gotta love the title, though.

Teen-age Strangler (1964) 61m

Confused title could mean either a strangler operating in the era of the teenager, or a teenager who is also a strangler, but turns out to be someone who strangles teenagers. Crime/youth pic was designed for teen market but has the pace of a public education film (Authority Figures, Misunderstood Teens, and You!). Hardnosed cop is on trail of strangler, suspects involvement of local leatherjackets The Fastbacks. The most wholesome of the gang is named – what else? – 'Jimmy'. Low-budget hallmarks include bare-bones score played on a surf guitar, a drag race which is so slow that no stunt drivers were required, and a cast recruited from various non-actors – the short TV announcement by the local sheriff contains a line reading so bad that it goes right out the other side of bad and looks like a great Method performance. How many parents utter phrases like "By Jupiter!" (unless they're Roman emperors), and how many teenagers

scream “Leave me be!” when they want to be left alone?

The Toy Box (1970) 89m

Lots of nudity and sex with a dash of violence in this weird mess. It’s about a mysterious ‘Uncle’ who invites guests to his castle to act out erotic vignettes that mostly end with someone getting done away with. The fact that Uncle has been dead for two years and is locked away in a room upstairs isn’t regarded as any problem by the guests, who are happy to perform in exchange for unseen rewards from his ‘toy box’, a big chest that glows when opened. The first ten minutes, which features a girl experimenting with her new ‘appliance’, is supposed to be erotic but is stupid to the point of hilarity (“I suppose it’s better than being raped” she muses). Any sensual scenes that follow are just as bad, but unfortunately most of the remaining film is either dull or confusing, or sometimes both. It concludes with an absurd attempt to justify all the titillation by throwing in an irrelevant science-fiction premise. It’s also notable for having no visual post-production! All ‘effects’ are achieved by shaking the camera or making it go out of focus. Even the titles are filmed in camera!

2000 Maniacs (1964) 75m

Herschell Gordon Lewis’ strongest film – for once it doesn’t come across as a totally amateur effort (although the opening ten minutes need vigorous pruning) and manages to generate tension. Three couples are duped (by fake roadsigns) into a small Southern town, where they are proclaimed guests of honour at a festival by the loud, obnoxious mayor and the grinning, eager townspeople. As we already know the film’s title, it’s not too hard to figure out what’s going to happen next. Not as bloody as other Lewis gorefests, but more unsettling: this is the stuff of nightmares, from which there appears no escape. Lively bluegrass music (“The South will rise again!”) and sunny, pastoral outdoor settings mix merrily with spilled blood and torture. Ideally, this should be the first Lewis film you see.

The Undertaker and His Pals (1967) 60m

Low-budgeter doesn’t look too bad in a cinema, but would be a more attractive undertaking if the characters didn’t enjoy the violence so much. The original cut of the film was reportedly even gorier. Undertaker of Shady Rest Funeral Home, Mr Mort (subtle) charges outrageous prices for services; he’s kept in business by the owners of a diner who, for rather nebulous reasons, murder and dismember young women. Most of film is strictly routine (though Ray Dannis, as the undertaker, adds some colour) but it develops some interesting turns when things abruptly start going wrong for the bad guys. The final sequence, in which Dannis stalks a woman up a staircase, is reminiscent of silent horror movies. Attempts at slapstick are embarrassingly bad, though the film does get laughs from audiences, intentionally or otherwise. Characters who have been brutally killed appear before the end credits for a final bow, as if to say that the whole thing was only done in fun.

Up! (1976) 84m

Russ Meyer sex’n’violence mixture is set in a redneck mountain town and is replete with characters who are hell bent on raping or killing each other. It has many outrageous touches – an opening S&M sequence with Adolf Hitler, an axe-swinging brawl in a bar, and all kinds of malarky with Kitten Natividad cavorting naked in the countryside and providing an overwritten, phoney Greek Chorus (this was probably co-writer Roger Ebert’s contribution). Wild scenes, however, jar with some of the violent intention behind them: a riverside rape sequence isn’t made funny simply by giving the man a cartoonish, oversized erection. Confusing plot isn’t memorable – it’s obvious that Meyer was going all-out for effect with this one.

Venus in Furs (1970) 85m

Handsomely produced, good-looking film by Jess Franco was filmed in Rio and Istanbul – visually it’s a treat, especially if you see it in a cinema. Too bad it doesn’t have a story. Self-conscious art piece centres around that old standby The Mysterious Woman – actually, the penultimate punchline makes it nothing more than an overlong version of an old urban myth (there was this guy that picks up this hitch-hiking girl one night and he gives her his jacket to keep her warm...). The ultimate punchline conveniently forces you to reassess the muddle of the previous eighty

minutes, and supposedly excuses such pontificating as "How can you run from a dead person unless you're dead yourself?" and "She was dead...or was she alive? Was I dead? Was I alive?" Film's dialogue struggles to remain consistently pointless. Franco's art period didn't last too long. Still, it does have whips, nudity, and Klaus Kinski. Icy Maria Rohm plays 'Venus'; James Darren is a confused trumpet player. Trivia: author of story is one Baron Leopold von Sacher, from whom we get the term 'masochism', a condition that could also apply to viewers that keep watching Franco's films.

The Violent Years (1956) 65m

High-school girls run wild in this Ed Wood story. The film opens with a judge declaring that one girl's parents are powerless to stop her from being put in the pokey because their negligence led to her going off the rails in the first place. This is mighty strange – there is no evidence of this at all, yet even the parents blame themselves. It's probably Wood's attempt to provide his exploitation fare with a moral. The girls start off with a bit of graft and robbery, and finish by breaking into the school and trashing their classroom (being careful not to wreck any props that look expensive). Amongst all this lies the film's most interesting moment, when the group "criminally attacks" a young man in the woods (we can assume this means "rapes"). Although it sounds action-packed, film is quite static. Action sequences have no excitement. The finale, in which the judge delivers a long-winded sermon about "thrill-seeking", is trademark Wood.

Village of the Giants (1965) 80m

Bert I. Gordon adaptation of H G Wells' The *Food of the Gods*, includes such faithful nods to the original text as giant teenagers losing their clothes and telling those party-pooper adults to take a hike. Oh, Bert! Best scene is the first, in which teens emerge from a spun-out car and start dancing in the mud (if the tune sounds familiar, it was because it was later used by Quentin Tarantino for *Death Proof*), and it looks for a moment like we could be getting something wild in the Meyer/Zugsmith mould. Instead, Bert reverts to his old schtick of blowing things up to giant size (cat, dog, spider, ducks, breasts). The oversize props are his worst yet – the 'giant' Beau Bridges (Oh, Beau!) is represented by a pair of immobile perpendicular legs. Ron Howard is a goofy kid ("I prefer to be called Genius") who rather disturbingly doesn't look all too different from his later incarnation as *Happy Days*' Richie Cunningham. Bert would later repent by filming Wells' novel as *Food of the Gods*. He screwed that one up, too.

Vixen (1968) 70m

One of Russ Meyer's most well-known flicks, the title of which he capitalized on in subsequent films. Instead of his usual desert/bayou settings, the action takes place in Canadian mountains. It's there that Vixen (Erica Gavin) and her husband own a lodge. How can anyone marry someone named 'Vixen' and not expect trouble? The sexually insatiable Vixen fools around or teases every other male that comes in range (including her brother), allowing for many romps in bed, in the woods, in the river....it's easy to see why this film is so popular. The usual sexual tensions prevail – Meyer loves throwing a group of incompatible people together and watching them get on each other's nerves. However, the most memorable scene has nothing to do with sex: Vixen, her husband, a draft dodger, and a communist are cooped up in a tiny plane and argue and scream at each other until they're blue in the face. It's the least expected climax, given the events of the rest of the film. Great fun.

Voyage to the Planet of Prehistoric Women (1968) 78m

If you've already seen *Voyage to the Prehistoric Planet*, then guess what! You're seeing it again! Old scenes (the man-eating plant, the robot caring for an injured astronaut) are shamelessly recycled – even the title recycles half of the previous one. The main difference here is *Women*. Director-cum-editor Peter Bogdanovich rushed down to the beach with a bunch of girls and filmed shots of them standing around in bikinis that look like they were hand-me-downs from *The Flintstones*. The gals are the only part of the film that make it distinguishable from its predecessor. Mamie Van Doren plays the Queen of the Venusians, who falls in love – telepathically – with one of the two astronauts that have landed on her planet. The

two of them never meet, but at least they love each other for their minds. Mamie's presence was for the sake of billing only – as all her lines are voiceovers she isn't required to do much other than frown and stare. If you've already seen the earlier recut of this film then this one will only be tedious.

Voyage to the Prehistoric Planet (1965) 78m

Roger Corman got his money's worth out of this one. It's a re-edited version of a Russian SF film called *Planet of Storms*, which Corman purchased and reworked with new footage to create two different movies. Spot the new footage if you can. Clue: it never integrates with any of the original film. Astronauts (actually cosmonauts) crash-land on Venus. While they're waiting to be saved by the two Americans in the additional footage they explore the planet and run into various prehistoric plants and critters. The cosmonauts don't find any other lifeforms they can communicate with, so the story clunks along without too much incident. One good scene at the end when the two cosmonauts climb onto their robot to escape erupting lava, only to find that the robot's weight parameters have been exceeded. Slow pace, dubbing and strained 'new' storyline add to the alien-planet sets to create something quite surreal, especially if you're watching it at two in the morning.

Wild Gals of the Naked West (1962) 65m

Plotless nudie distinguishes itself above others of its genre only because of Russ Meyer's involvement. An 'old' timer (no attempt is made to give him a convincing beard) reminisces about the glory days of an abandoned western town. It's basically lots of Benny Hill type farce and running gags, none of which are funny and just look embarrassing now. Meyer doesn't have much a budget, but makes stylish use out of minimal props and backdrops (usually painted in bright colours), twisting his camera at all angles and cutting his film at a brisk pace.

Wild Guitar (1962) 92m

Arch Hall Jr got the lead in this pic thanks to his dad Arch Hall (Snr), who produced. Film sets him up to be a guitar-slinging, motorcycle-riding rebel type (his credibility is strained when he is overtaken by a stationwagon in the opening credits) but then settles for a 'local boy in the big city' theme instead. Arch looks pretty creepy even when he's being polite and trying aw-shucks Elvis mannerisms around his girl Vicky and manager Mike (William Mathers, who's pretty good here). Standard rise to fame, conflict with girlfriend, corrupt business dealings ensue. A few musical numbers (nothing special) and one nice interlude in an ice-skating rink. Film is of interest because it was the first assignment for director Ray Dennis Steckler (also playing a flunky), who was required to actually film a script this time around. Pretty ordinary, but where else can you see Hall and Steckler punching each other out?

The Wild Wild World of Jayne Mansfield (1968) 99m

Jayne's own mondo movie. Breathy Jayne Mansfield impersonator narrates over a collection of risqué footage compiled from different jaunts around Europe. She is always coyly shocked about what she sees (strip clubs, nude beaches, etc). Film would be just another exploitation pic if not for the presence of Mansfield and the terrible narration. Just to add another layer of chintz to the tackiness, Mansfield herself becomes potential object of the exploitative lens: she was killed in an auto accident, making this her final screen appearance. Subsequently we visit the scene of the accident and take a peek around her house – although intended as a tribute, material that comprises the rest of the film doesn't seem to be appropriate. Or does it? Mansfield might have approved after all.

Wild Women of Wongo (1958) 71m

A tale of two islands: Wongo has beautiful girls but unattractive men, Goona has handsome men but homely girls. Argument of film seems to be that if beautiful people are attracted to each other, then ugly people are also attracted to each other, so everybody's happy. The first Z-grader to be filmed in Florida's Coral Castle, saving the expense of using a studio or set (an idea later picked up by *Nude on the Moon* and *Jimmy the Boy Wonder*), story follows Omoo, daughter of the Wongo king, and her love for Engor, son of the Goona king ("I am my father's son!" Engor declares). Omoo's father doesn't want to

lose all the village's women to the handsome studs of Goona, so cleverly sends them all away to be sacrificed to the dragon god (it's an alligator) in a nearby temple. Film keeps cutting to the same irritating shots of running commentary by parrot. So-called 'underwater footage' is filmed through viewing window of an aquarium. Worst catfight ever. Bad parrot dubbing. Final scene shows that none of the actors can even wink, let alone act. Title later became a catchy song by The Tubes.

The Wizard of Gore (1970) 96m

"I am Montag, the defier of reason!": a crown that director Herschell Gordon Lewis himself could claim ownership of. Yet another HGL pic in which a maniac kills young women for no reason, again and again, until the film finishes with his own death. Montag is a magician who performs *grand guignol* tricks onstage with audience volunteers who emerge unscathed but are then found dead shortly afterwards. When it's all over the heroine asks lots of questions about the holes in the plot and is rewarded with a rush of fake endings and a tired, clichéd final credit. Hands wallow in sheep entrails and red paint aplenty. Slow pacing of scenes will have you tearing your hair out. Continuity is terrible, but may be deliberate, since what Montag is doing is an illusion. "Your eyes will see, but your mind will not believe!" You got that right, Herschell.

Xtro (1982) 86m

Addled story suggests that the film-makers were more interested in individual scenes/set pieces than a coherent plot. They even wrote a different ending for the video release! Man gets abducted by spaceship, returns to Earth years later as a sort of metamorphosed alien offspring, continues to perpetuate species on Earth. Naturally this involves sex, a few murders, and a lot of gooey effects. Yet another independent pic inspired by *Alien* – low budget, to be sure, but with enough innovative touches to keep it interesting (e.g. the design for the alien is achieved by having a man walking 'upside down' on all fours). Offbeat means of homicide would have been right at home in Dr Phibes movies – snake in salad, giant toy soldier, etc. Made with some effort, so looks pretty good.

Young Playthings (1977) 105m

Made in Joe Sarno's 'Swedish Period', film has plenty of flesh, couplings, orgies, and sex toys, but is staged with distancing techniques, lots of dialogue, slow pacing and dubbed accents that are about as erotic as the Muppet Chef. Sex-hungry Nora is determined to get her friend Gunilla (softcore regular Christina Lindberg) into a threesome. After a chance meeting with Britt, a reclusive toy collector, they're all stripping off, painting their faces with Columbine make-up, and miming to stories playing on a tape recorder. However, there can only ever be one Columbine in a pantomime show, and when more characters enter the cast Britt and Nora lose their grip on reality. There's nothing else like Sarno's film in the genre. Its Z-grade budget creates a minimalist atmosphere that verges on surrealism: the performers are less like players on a stage than toys in a box, the action returns to the same sets repeatedly, the piano-and-drum score takes on an insidious quality, the actors emote like sleepwalkers, and Sarno's introspective dialogue keeps peeling more layers away from the story. The raincoat crowd must have been flummoxed when they shuffled into cinemas expecting to see the usual skin flick and got this artsploitation fare instead.

Zontar, the Thing from Venus (1966) 84m

AIP's ripoff of its own *It Conquered the World*, filmed in 16mm by Larry Buchanan. Anthony Houston has the Lee Van Cleef role, informing friend John Agar of his satellite contact with an extra-terrestrial being. "Even though his name is unpronounceable in any Earth language, it would sound something like Zon-tar". There are places in Wales only slightly less pronounceable. Story follows the original movie scene by scene but is in colour this time. Film's significant themes are spelled out in less than a minute before the title credits even begin. Houston's wife gets the best moment when she finally confronts the alien fiend in his underground hideaway. "Zontar!" she admonishes him. "You're slimy!" Every aspect of production is low-rent. Great caves, though (and for once, not shot in Bronson Canyon).